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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 21, No. 3 JULY, 1951

A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

SIX-GUN CYCLONE — W. C. Tuttle — 9
Wherever there's trouble, these two roving range detectives are sure to show up—and take a hand

Three New Short Stories

PITCHFORK COUNTRY — Noel Loomis — 37
Kill or be killed—that's what Galloway wanted

BELLED CUNNING — Harold F. Cruickshank — 64
Her mate killed, the beautiful vixen battles on

SON-OF-A-GUN STEW — Francis L. Fugate — 102
Biscuits serves a masterpiece in six-gun sauce!

Western Fiction Classics

NO PEACE FOR A PRODIGAL (Novelet) — Leslie Ernenwein — 46
Fighting Bill Quantrell tries to stop range war

JERK LINE — Willard Luce — 75
The Bachelor Creek railroad was a troubled run!

RUN, SHEEP, RUN (Novelet) — Samuel Mines — 82
Mart Jackson thought no price too big for peace

Features

TRAIL BLAZERS — Captain Ranger — 6

COW COUNTRY NEWS ROUNDUP — A New Department — 74

THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT — Chuck Stanley — 99

Also See "Sagebrush Sam Says—" on Pages 21, 79, and 87

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AT LEADING STORES COAST-TO-COAST

The gentle art of trapping mountain lions

ONCE a hideout for cattle rustlers, Arizona's Tonto Rim is a rugged place. Today it still harbors danger to the ranchers in the valleys far below. Mountain lions come down from the Rim's high cliffs to take heavy toll of calves and sheep. Occasionally a colt falls within reach of the big beasts' snarling jaws. Stopping these four-footed killers is a tough job in the Rim country.

Hank Emgo was a specialist in exterminating big cats. Sometimes he hunted them with a pack of trained dogs and a .30-30 Winchester in his saddle scabbard. Sometimes he trapped them.

A small man with a straggly gray mustache and cold blue eyes, the wizened old-timer knew as much about a mountain lion's habits as the big cats did themselves.

"The hooraw of trailin' them with dawgs makes an exciting hunt, but for steady gettin', trappin' is as good a way as any to get the job done," Hank declared one warm Arizona evening when we were holed up in a line camp by a spring part way up the Rim.

"Most anybody with natural-born trappin' sense can trap lions," the little man continued in the understatement of the year.

"You gotta know the country you're workin' in and remember a few things about cougars. First they are the wing-dingest long distance travelers in the predatory animal world—out West anyhow.

"Cats will travel twenty-five miles and up on a single night lookin' for a rancher's stock, or maybe a deer. They live way up in the cliffs and mountain tops but their killin' is mostly done down where there's grass.

Hank accepted a tailormade quirly, lit it with steady outdoorsman's hands.

"Lions work pretty much after a pattern," he continued after a few puffs. "The average big cat in the Southwest runs a hundred sixty pounds, has sharp eyes, keen ears and is the best stalker goin', includin' Injuns.

"When one gets within strikin' distance of its prey it takes a big jump an' knocks whatever it's stalkin' for a loop. It don't take but a second."

"How far can they jump? I've seen a lion leap twenty feet up a straight up and down rock wall to make a getaway."

Following a kill, which is generally made shortly after dusk, lions generally gorge themselves. Then if the prey is too large to drag away they slip back to their mountain homes, often returning next evening for a second meal.

"That," said Hank, "is where they make their most common mistake. Another is that they generally travel regular routes from and back into the mountains."

How to Make a Cougar Set

In preparing carcass sets, Hank used three traps—one buried between the fore and hind legs of the dead animal, one near the back, and the third near the rump. Hank placed his traps about twenty inches away from the carcass. He also cautioned against making carcass sets in country where dogs might blunder into the traps.

"In fact protectin' any lion set with a sign is a good notion," said Hank. It's hell to build a set, then have some two-legged galoot spring it and ruin all your work."

For ridge and travel route sets, Hank placed two parallel traps in the ground with the springs at right angles across the lion trail. A few stones set between or in front of the traps aided, he said, in throwing an approaching cat off its stride, thus increasing the chance of the animal stepping on the trap pan rather than over or between the traps.

Another dodge Hank made use of was the trapper's trick of fixing his traps so they could not be sprung by inquisitive birds or small animals.

He fitted a small twig upright from the base of the trap to the middle of the pan. A small stick set horizontally across the trap under the pan would serve the same purpose. Some trappers make or buy special light coiled springs to use instead of twigs or sticks.

Action Proves Hank's Points

"In trappin' for lions or makin' any kind of a buried set there is one sure mark of an amateur," Hank declared. By this time we were getting ready to turn in for the night.

"That's a too shallow hole. Get down on your hunkers. Dig the hole so it will hold the trap at a level slightly lower than the surrounding ground, leaving a hardly noticeable depression over the set.

"When Mister Cat comes along, the shallow spot throws his gait off balance, like an hombre missing the last step on the cellar stairs. That means the big fellow's paw comes down hard on the trap pan. Result: You've got a cleanly sprung trap, and a caught cat. Maybe I can show you both in the mornin', if you've nothin' special to do."

I hadn't. We left the line camp after an early breakfast. Starting out on horseback we followed a twisting canyon upward until we seemed to be lost in a towering maze of rock ledges and sandstone cliffs. At times a jagged fragment of Arizona's bright sky far above us was all the blue we could see.

When we spoke our voices echoed eerily in the tomblike quiet. After pushing on for about three miles we came to a steep side canyon that cut in from the right.

Hank reined in, dismounted, took his rifle from the saddle scabbard and checked it.

"The rest of the way we walk."

Walk! Much of it was plain climbing with frequent hand holds and a boost up, scaling the smooth rock. Now and then Hank pointed to lion tracks. He was perhaps fifty yards ahead of me when he topped out on the canyon ridge. I heard a shot.

A few minutes later we stood together on the rocky ridge. The big cat, dead now but still warm, was a beauty. It would weigh closer to 200 pounds, I judged, than 160.

Hank showed me his Emgo ridge set for mountain lions. The huge creature caught by a forepaw was proof of its efficiency.

"Leastways you didn't have the trip for nothin'," Hank paused, then added dryly, "Didn't figure you would."

—CAPTAIN RANGER

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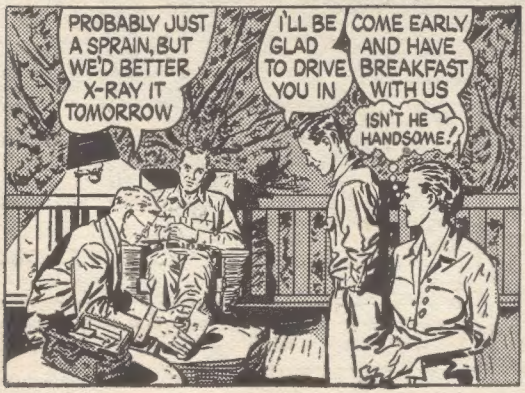
BUD WENT TO THE RESCUE AND THEN...

HER SHOUTS DROWNED BY THE ROARING WATER, KAY STEVENS THROWS A STONE TO ATTRACT THE YOUNG FISHERMAN'S ATTENTION, BUT THEN...

AN HOUR LATER
DOC PETERS IS COMING AFTER SUPPER. WON'T YOU STAY AND SHARE OUR TROUT?
THANK YOU, YES! BUT WITH THIS BEARD I MUST LOOK LIKE A TRAMP
USE MY RAZOR IF YOU'D LIKE TO SHAVE

THESE ARE THE SLICKEST-SHAVING BLADES I'VE EVER RUN ACROSS. MY FACE FEELS GREAT!
SOLD ON THIN GILLETTES, EH? WELL, THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN


PROBABLY JUST A SPRAIN, BUT WE'D BETTER X-RAY IT TOMORROW
I'LL BE GLAD TO DRIVE YOU IN
COME EARLY AND HAVE BREAKFAST WITH US
ISN'T HE HANDSOME!

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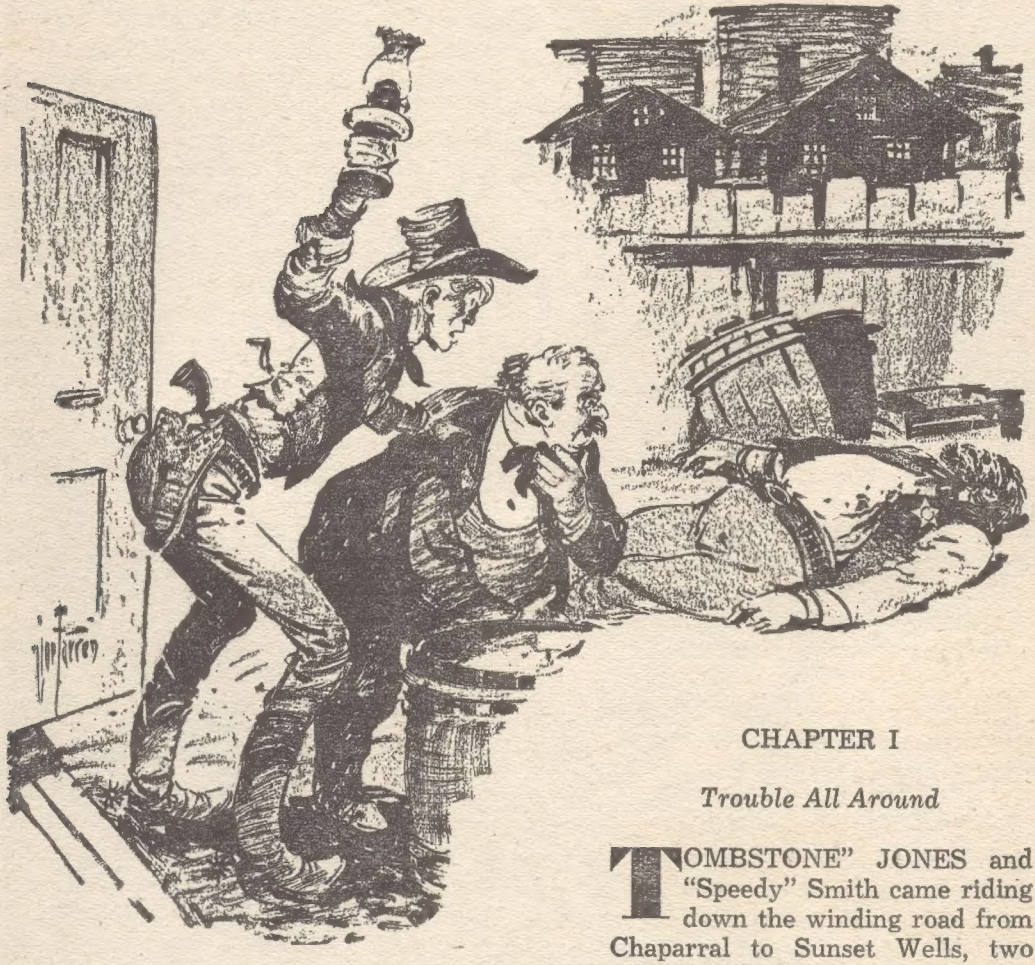
SIX-GUN CYCLONE



CHAPTER I

Trouble All Around

"TOMBSTONE" JONES and "Speedy" Smith came riding down the winding road from Chaparral to Sunset Wells, two odd-looking cowpokes, erstwhile investigators for the Cattlemen's Association—if their interpretation of

Wherever there's trouble, these roving range sleuths are sure to show up—especially if it leads to robbery, jail and torture!

A TOMBSTONE and SPEEDY NOVELET by W. C. TUTTLE

TOMBSTONE JONES

Jim Keaton's telegram was correct. Speedy's telegram had said:

LEAVING FOR SUNSET WELLS. WHERE DO YOU WANT US TO GO NEXT?

Naturally the telegram left them wide open for a sarcastic reply, but it merely said:

WESTERN UNION DOESN'T CARE TO HANDLE EXACT WORDING OF MY SUGGESTION AS TO WHERE I WOULD LIKE TO HAVE YOU GO. USE YOUR OWN JUDGMENT. NOTHING IN SIGHT HERE. ADVISE YOU GET JOBS.

They had started for Sunset Wells, still not exactly sure as to his meaning, but having the feeling that all was not well. Tombstone Jones was seven feet tall, and about as heavy-set as an exclamation point. He had a long, lean face, inquiring eyes, a generous nose and a wide, thin-lipped mouth. His length and width belied his strength, and his conversation branded him as a drifting Munchausen.

Speedy Smith, only five feet, seven inches tall, carried less weight per foot than did Tombstone Jones. Speedy had the ability to pick up Tombstone's prevarications and carry them to a very brilliant and convincing conclusion.

There was nothing about these two oddly-assorted riders to even suggest that they might be law-men, although time after time they had blundered into the solution of a range mystery. Jim Keaton, secretary of the association, pondered their deeds and misdeeds in amazement. In time he discovered that they didn't even know when a case was closed. In fact, his wife declared that he talked about them in his sleep.

They had almost reached Sunset Wells in the late afternoon of a very hot day. There had been very little conversation during the long ride, but now Tombstone said wearily:

"I've been thinkin' quite a lot."

Speedy eased himself in the saddle and said: "What am I supposed to do—give three cheers?"

"Oh, I ain't solved nothin', Speedy—yet. What was it Jim said in that telegram? Somethin' about us usin' our own judgment?"

"Somethin' like that," admitted Speedy. "Judgment!"

"Maybe he meant imagination," suggested Speedy.

"Imagination! Huh! Us imaginin' where to go! We ain't mind readers. All a secretary has to do is tell us where to go—and now he's done laid down on the job. You can't jist go around sayin' to folks, 'Tombstone Jones is the greatest detective on earth, and I help him as much as I can.' You can't do that, Speedy."

"Not unless I'm an awful liar."

"That's what I mean. It'd be dangerous, too. But Jim Keaton don't care how much danger me and you run into."

"Listen, Knothead," sighed Speedy, "can't yuh understand that Jim Keaton has fired us. We ain't got no jobs."

"Fired?" gasped Tombstone. "That's ridiculous. The cattlemen need our brains."

"What for?" asked Speedy.

"Yeah, that's right—I forgot about that, Speedy."

"Just keep on forgettin' about it. We're fired, and that's all there is to it. He says

that as far as he can see there ain't nothin' in sight."

AFTER a long pause Tombstone said quietly: "Speedy, yuh don't suppose Jim is losin' his eyesight, do yuh? That'd be terrible. Such a nice feller—can't see a danged thing. We better send him a telegram from Sunset Wells."

"Yea-a-ah?" queried Speedy. "What'll we say?"

"Oh, anythin'," replied Tombstone vaguely. "Make it funny, if yuh want to. Somethin' to take his mind off his bad eyes."

"Who said he had bad eyes?"

"Said so himself. He said there ain't nothin' in sight here."

Speedy turned in his saddle and looked at Tombstone soberly. "This is sort of a personal question," he said quietly, "but how old was you before you showed the first indication of human intelligence?"

"I ain't sure about that," replied Tombstone, "but Pa allus said that I was goin' to grow up to be a heavy thinker, 'cause I never spoke a word until I was six. Ma worried, but Pa said, 'Don't rush him—he's thinkin' jist what to say.' How'd you happen to bring that up, Speedy?"

"Oh, nothin'—I was jist curious. I can see how it was—at the age of six they're a little too big to drown. Well, here's Sunset Wells."

"If we're fired," said Tombstone, "I'm goin' to send Jim a telegram that'll curl his hair."

"Who will write it—you can't."

Speedy got down stiffly and flexed his legs.

"You allus write the telegrams," reminded Tombstone.

"They never curled anybody's hair. I'm a gentleman."

"You are?" queried Tomstone in amazement. "Well, I'm shore surprised. That's one side of yore nature I never knowed anythin' about. It jist goes to show that yuh can bunk with a man for years and not atchally know him."

"Live and learn," sighed Speedy, tying his horse.

Across the street was a big, two-story, frame building, weathered, minus most of its original paint. A huge sign indicated that it was the county courthouse. They could see people inside the building, sitting on the window sills.

"Must be an important case," remarked Speedy, as they crossed the street to the sidewalk near the steps leading down from the big front door. A group of several men came out, arguing heatedly, led by a big man clad in rusty black, cowboy boots and a big black sombrero.

Beside him, listening intently, was a raw-boned cowpoke.They were about halfway down the dozen steps, when a commotion broke out inside the building. The group of men stopped short, looking back, when out of the doorway came a calf. It was a small, spotted animal, bawling lustily, and it went squarely between the legs of the big man, whose legs were not quite far enough apart—to start with, that is.

The big man, being partly off-balance, went all the way. His legs shot out and he came down with a crash on the seat of his pants, while the calf, bawling madly, headed down the street. Tombstone and Speedy grinned with unholy glee, but no one else seemed to see any humor in the

SPEEDY SMITH

situation. The big man got to his feet, swearing viciously and looking back at the open doorway, and then came on, limping slightly.

He almost ran into Tombstone Jones, stopped short and glared in Tombstone's face. His eyes shifted to Speedy momentarily, but he directed his order to Tombstone.

"Get out of town—both of yuh—and fast!" he snarled.

"Hadn't yuh ort to reconsider that order?" queried Tombstone. "After all, it wasn't our calf, yuh know."

"I said get out of town. I don't like hired gunmen—and when I don't like a thing—"

"Don't call me a thing," advised Tombstone. "I hate it."

The big man, without any warning, swung a powerful right at the tall cowpoke's jaw—but the jaw wasn't there, because Tombstone moved it slightly as he wound up his own right and hit the big man squarely on the jaw. Tombstone Jones was noted for putting his heart and soul into a punch, and this was no exception. The big man went flat on the sidewalk.

Whether the raw-boned cowboy tried to help the big man, or made a menacing gesture toward Tombstone, Speedy didn't care. He leaped high in the air and hit the raw-boned one squarely on the nose, knocking him to his haunches. His hat

The next instant Tombstone went through the roof

went flying into the street. The other man started down the steps, but halted, not seeming to know what to do next.

"C'mon," whispered Speedy. "Let's go find some food."

"Yeah," drawled Tombstone quietly. "Exercise like that allus makes me hungry."

Another crowd was coming out of the courthouse, and the men on the steps seemed more interested in them than in Tombstone and Speedy, who walked briskly down the sidewalk.

"I'd kinda like to know who I hit," Tombstone said.

"Same here, but don't worry, we'll find out. So we're hired gunmen, are we?"

"We are?" queried Tombstone. "Who's payin' us—and how much?"

"C'mon. Yuh're ruinin' my appetite."

IT WAS a small restaurant, conducted by a patient looking Chinese, who took their order. They had barely started their meal, when a big, black-whiskered man came in, moving slowly. He started to sit down at a table, looked sharply at Tombstone and Speedy and came over to their table.

"I'm Jud Holcomb," he said quietly.

"I'm Jones and he's Smith," said Tombstone. "What's yore business, Mr. Holcomb?"

"I'm the sheriff."

"Well, fine! Glad to meetcha."

Jud Holcomb showed little enthusiasm. He said, "You boys arrived recently, didn't yuh?"

"Just ahead of the calf, Sheriff," replied Speedy.

"What do yuh mean?"

"We came out of the north just before the calf came out of the courthouse," explained Speedy soberly.

The sheriff nodded slowly, looking at

Tombstone Jones. He said, "Uh-huh, uh-huh. I see. One of the boys said that Buck Shawn got hit by a seven-footer."

"Buck Shawn, eh?" remarked Speedy. "Sheriff, who did I hit?"

"Steve Parnell, foreman for Shawn's outfit. He is pretty mad. Says he got hit unexpectedly."

"What was he listenin' for—a bell or a bugle?" asked Speedy.

"He didn't say. Jones why did you hit Shawn?"

" 'Cause he took a swing at me."

"Yeah, I heard he did. Shawn said he didn't remember."

"He ain't very bright," remarked Speedy.

"Why do yuh say that?" asked the sheriff.

" 'Cause he took a swing at Tombstone —and telegraphed it."

The sheriff grinned slowly and shook his head.

"Yuh're the first man he ever swung at, and didn't land," he said soberly. "Well, I've got to be goin'. See yuh later."

A few minutes after the sheriff left the restaurant another man came in. He was short and fat, slightly bowlegged, with a moonlike face and small eyes. He was whistling unmusically as he started to sit down at the next table. But when he saw Tombstone and Speedy, the whistle died, and he stood there, staring, clinging to the back of a chair.

"Hyah, Filthy," said Speedy soberly.

The man straightened up, drew a deep breath and shook his head.

"I—I don't remember ever seein' you," he said.

"Tombstone," said Speedy soberly, "I'd like to have yuh meet Elmer Weed, knowed as Filthy to his friends. Filthy, this is Tombstone Jones."

" 'T'meetcha," whispered Elmer Weed rather unsteadily.

"C'mon over and set at our table," invited Speedy. "It'll be a lot easier to talk thataway."

Elmer Weed came over and Speedy saw the deputy's badge on the lapel of Elmer's vest.

"Any friend of Speedy's is a suspect of mine, Elmer," Tombstone said. "I suppose yuh're old schoolmates, huh?"

"We're old jailmates," corrected Speedy. "How are yuh, Filthy?"

"I've been better. Doc says I've got a enlarged heart."

"He's crazy—it's yore gall. How long you been a deputy sheriff?"

"Ever since I married m' wife. She's the sheriff's sister."

"Sort of a deputy-in-law, huh?" remarked Tombstone.

"Kinda like that. Speedy, you ain't still mad at me, are yuh?"

"I'm workin' up to quite a mad spell," replied Speedy.

"Well," sighed Filthy, "you know what happened. From my angle, it was unavoidable."

"Yore angle," sneered Speedy. He turned to Tombstone and said, "Yuh see, me and Filthy got sloughed in jail in a place called Westgate, accused of stealin' horses. I'd just bought my horse from Filthy, and was ridin' my own rig. They said that my horse and Filthy's horse had been stolen."

"That ain't never been proved," interrupted Filthy.

"Never mind the proof. Their blamed jail was on the second floor, which put us up quite a ways from the ground. We managed to work a bar loose, but neither of us felt we had enough rubber in our system to take the shock off the jump. Filthy knowed a Mexican in that town, and managed to yell at him.

"The Mexican came in under the window and Filthy argued him in to gettin' about sixty feet of rope. The Mexican was scared, so Filthy borrowed five dollars from me, and dropped it to the Mexican. He told the man to tie a long string on the rope, tie a rock on the other end and fling it up through the window."

"It worked, too," added Filthy.

"Oh, it worked," agreed Speedy. "About fifteen minutes later I peeked out the window, and that rock hit me right between the eyes. When I woke up, Filthy was gone and so was the rope."

"I—I figured you was dead," said Filthy, "and I didn't want to leave no evidence behind."

"You shore didn't!" snorted Speedy. "You even took my horse and ridin' rig."

FILTHY swallowed hard, but didn't attempt to deny it. Tombstone said, "What happened to you, Speedy? Yuh're still alive—to all appearances, at least?"

"I jumped," sighed Speedy, "and I've been bowlegged ever since."

"I've allus wanted to pay you back that five dollars," said Filthy.

"Yuh have?" asked Speedy. "Still feel that way, Filthy?"

"As strong as ever—but I ain't got it to pay back."

"Now that everythin' is settled satisfactory," said Tombstone, "just shake hands and call it a deal."

"Yeah, a dirty deal," said Speedy.

"Aw, I'm sad about it," insisted Filthy. "I'll tell yuh, Speedy, I ain't had a good night's sleep since it happened. Nobody here knows it, not even Jud Holcomb. Why, I never even told my wife. It was the one black mark on my white record."

"How many prizes have yuh ever won?" asked Speedy soberly.

"Prizes for what?"

"Lyin', you bat-eared saddle-slicker. Sleepless nights! You forget that I knowed you awful well, Filthy."

"Aw, bury the hatchet," advised Tombstone. "What's done is done. Filthy, what's this we hear about a feud in Sunset Wells? One of yore leadin' citizens took a swing at me."

"So yuh're the tall jigger who felled Buck Shawn! Man, I could easy love you. But," added Filthy cautiously, "look out. Buck's a hellwinder on wheels—and he's got guns behind him. Nobody ever knocked him down before, and he's awful irked. About that there feud. Yuh see—"

"Cut it down to the nubbin'," interrupted Speedy. "You allus was a long-winded cuss, Filthy."

"I'll cut this to a skeleton," promised Filthy. "Twenty-five years ago Buck Shawn fell in love with a woman, but she up and married Jim Weston, and they owned the Box Eighty-eight. Shawn owns the Double S spread, the biggest in this country. Two years ago Jim Weston got himself killed. Mrs. Weston—everybody calls her 'Ma' Weston now—she swears that Buck Shawn has tried to ruin her layout. He tried to buy her out, but she won't sell. He says she's crazy to accuse him, and then he swears she's havin' her riders steal his cows.

"Well, anyway, things gets worse, when Shawn brings in a cow and her suckin' calf. The cow wears the Double S on her left hip, and the calf is branded with the Box Eighty-eight on its right hip. We impounds the cow and calf in the livery stable. Today they holds a hearin' with plenty swearin'. Old Judge Conway is what you'd call nonplussed.

"They bring in the calf. Hey, that's the one that got loose and tripped Shawn on the steps up there! Well, sir, that calf's brand has been vented, and the cow is gone. Shawn uproars ve-hemently. He's been doublecrossed. But he's still got an ace in the hole. He's got a Box Eighty-eight hide that shows it's been altered from the Double S.

"Yessir, he's got that hide right with him now. He sends one of his men out after it, and he brings it back, spreads the smelly thing out on a table, and I'll be darned if it ain't branded with the Circle Seven, which don't belong to either side. Buck Shawn almost busted his gizzard. Well, the judge throwed the case out of court."

Tombstone grinned widely. "Mr. Shawn was nonplussed, too, huh? Well, that's interestin', Filthy. Who owns the Circle Seven?"

"Hailstorm Wilson, one of the meanest old badgers that ever made a track in the sand. Him and his son, Ira and their one rider, Slim Keene, run the Circle Seven, and they're as salty as the ocean. When they unwrapped that hide, Hailstorm got up and demanded a warrant for Buck Shawn's arrest, allegin' that Shawn stole the cow and killed her for the hide. Whoo-e-e-e! Well, that's the tale, gents."

"No wonder that Buck Shawn was swingin' wild," grinned Speedy. "An air-tight case, until somebody stuck a pin into it."

They paid for their meal and all walked outside.

"Speedy, I'm shore glad you've done forgiven me," Filthy said.

"Ignorant happiness," sighed Speedy, as they walked down to the sheriff's office, where a team and buckboard were tied out in the front.

Filthy said, "Oh-oh! Ma Weston's down there, haranguin' with Jud Holcomb."

CHAPTER II

Speedy Lands in Jail

AS THEY came up to the front of the office, Jud Holcomb, Ma Weston and Hailstorm Wilson came out. Ma Weston was a big, rawboned woman with a rather pretty face, snapping eyes and a very determined expression. Hailstorm Wilson was a small man, bow-legged, hard-eyed, and with a fierce mustache. He said,

"Well, what are yuh goin' to do—let Shawn butcher all my cows?"

"I ain't lettin' nobody do nothin'!" rasped the exasperated sheriff. "I'm here to enforce the law."

"What law?" asked Ma Weston.

Jud Holcomb couldn't think exactly what to say.

Hailstorm said, "The law that won't let me go out and shoot Buck Shawn."

"Go ahead," rasped the sheriff. "Go shoot him—and then we'll hang yuh for murder."

"Fine outlook," remarked Hailstorm bleakly. "All I want is justice."

"You'll get justice!"

"Not if yuh hang me for shootin' Buck Shawn."

"Stop arguin'," said Ma Weston. "It might be justice to take you out and hang yuh—just on suspicion."

"I—I'm kinda helpless on this here matter," said the sheriff.

"You was born helpless, Jud Holcomb," declared the woman, "and never tried to do anything to change that condition. Among the many mistakes I've made I voted for you. You know what I'm goin' to do? I'm sendin' to the Cattlemen's Association for help."

"Yuh are?" queried the sheriff.

"I am. I've belonged to it for years and I never asked for any help. Now, I'm goin' to ask 'em to clean out the varmints around here."

"They can't help yuh," said Hailstorm. "I belonged to it, too, but I quit. You put a strange detective into this country, and he won't last a minute. I'm tellin' yuh, he jist won't. That Shawn gang—"

"Wait a minute!" interrupted the sheriff. "You better be sure, Hailstorm, or they'll have yuh arrested for de-famation—or somethin' like that."

"Yuh're as bad as they are," said Hailstorm. "Allus protectin' 'em, Jud Holcomb."

"The lady's right," interjected Tombstone.

"What do you know about it?" snapped the sheriff.

"I've seen what they can do," replied Tombstone.

Ma Weston looked them over critically before she said, "I wouldn't be at all surprised. Do they know yuh're down here?"

"They keep pretty close tab on us, Ma'am."

"I don't blame 'em. Well, I'm goin' and send that telegram."

Tombstone started to say something, but Speedy kicked him on the ankle, and said quietly, "Shut up."

MRS. WESTON and Hailstorm went up the street, with Hailstorm a few feet behind. Filthy looked at Jud Holcomb and said,

"They kinda had yuh nonplussed, didn't they, Juddie?"

"Them two!" snorted the sheriff. "Bah!"

He spun around on one high heel which caught in a knothole in the sidewalk, and

went down heavily on the seat of his pants. His hat jerked down over his eyes, but he cuffed it aside, his face the picture of rage and disappointment.

"I busted it!" he said explosively. "I heard it bust."

"Yore ankle?" asked Filthy anxiously.

"No, my pipe! I had it in my hip pocket."

Jud Holcomb got up, felt in his hip pocket, confirmed his worst fears and glared at Filthy.

"Fix that hole!" he snorted. "I've told you a dozen times to do it, but yuh're too blamed lazy to use a hammer."

"That's shore news to me," replied Filthy. "There was a knot in that hole—always—until you just stomped on it, Juddie."

"Never mind that—fix it."

Jud Holcomb went limping away. Speedy said soberly,

"I ain't settin' up as a critic, but it shore looks like me and Tombstone have discovered the place where all the nuts come from."

In front of the hotel they found Hailstorm Wilson, slumped in a chair, the picture of frustration. Tombstone said, "Did Mrs. Weston send her telegram?"

"How do I know?" he snapped. "That's her business."

"She's smart, don'tcha know it? She'll get help."

"Yeah? How do you know so much?"

"By experience," replied Tombstone expansively. "We've been detectin' for years. Down here on sort of a vacation."

Hailstorm looked at him narrowly. "Yea-a-ah?" he drawled. "You—uh-h-h—I see. Do yuh enjoy that kinda work?"

"It's our life," replied Tombstone. "We'd ruther chase a horse thief down a hole than anythin' on earth."

"Huh! Yuh would, huh? Didn't know they was takin' to holes this season."

"Oh yeah, it's the stylish thing t' do. They allus hole up, when we show up. Well, it's nice to have met yuh."

They went into the hotel, where the grizzled proprietor gave them a very expansive, if toothless, welcoming grin. Speedy signed the ancient register, and the old man studied the two names.

"Glad to have yuh," he said quietly. "I'm Ezry Miles. Yuh see, I was out in front and seen yuh pop Buck Shawn. But I'd advise yuh to keep yore eyes open and git out of town. Yuh can't pop Shawn and his outfit around and not git fuzzed up a little yourselves."

They went up to the room and deposited their war-bags. Speedy sat down on the bed and looked moodily at Tombstone.

"Don't get yore chest swelled," he advised. "We've shore made a first-class start toward gettin' a couple jobs for ourselves. Half the folks think we're marked men already."

"Yeah?" queried Tombstone. "What about the other half?"

"They're the ones who will do the markin'."

"Yeah, I reckon so. Speedy, did we really come down here to find jobs?"

"Well, what didja think we came here for?"

"You told the hotel keeper that it was

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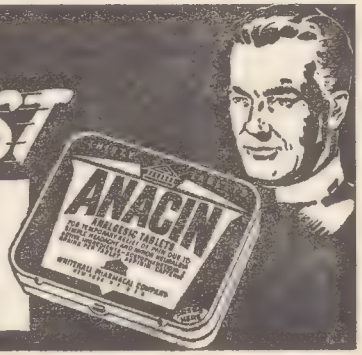

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sort of a vacation."

"I did not. You told him that yourself."

"I did? Why, that's funny. Yuh know I thought you said it, 'cause I was jist about to dispute the statement at the time. Speedy, what does foot-loose and fancy-free mean?"

"In our case," replied Speedy soberly, "it means that if anybody shoots us, the Cattlemen's Association won't care."

"I thought that might be it. I've been wonderin' about this hired gunman idea. What does a hired gunman usually get, Speedy?"

"It all depends on how many bullets hit him before he dies."

Tombstone sprawled on the bed and looked curiously at Speedy.

"What are yuh rubbin' yore jaw for?" he asked.

"That same danged old tooth is achin' again," mumbled Speedy.

"Yeah, and yuh're scared to go to a dentist. No nerve a-tall."

"Ain't no dentists in a place like this."

"Maybe not. If I had me a pair of pliers, I'd pull it for yuh."

"Over my dead body," declared Speedy miserably.

"Aw-w-w, an achin' tooth never killed anybody."

Speedy decided that he didn't want to go with Tombstone to size up the town; so Tombstone went alone. It was well after dark. Tombstone drifted eventually into the Eldorado Saloon, where a four-handed poker game was in progress. Tombstone had very little money, but had implicit faith in his luck and poker ability, so he bought a few stacks of white chips.

SPEEDY slept for an hour, and when he woke up the pain had gone. He pulled on his boots and went downstairs. There was no one in the little lobby as he went through and out on the sidewalk. It was a very dark night, and only an occasional lighted window illuminated the quiet street of the cowtown.

Speedy had no idea where to find Tombstone. He moved up the street, across from the Eldorado Saloon, and leaned against the Bank of Sunset Wells. It wasn't a very big bank. As he started to roll a cigarette he heard a sound, as though a heavy object had been upset inside the bank. He turned quickly to peer through the large window, and saw what looked like two shadows moving at the rear of the room. They were indistinct, but he caught the movement. To his left was a narrow alley, separating the bank from the general store.

Speedy stepped off the high, board sidewalk, into the alley and ran swiftly toward the rear of the bank. It was too dark for him to know when he reached the corner of the bank building, and it didn't really matter, because he crashed into someone, both of them moving swiftly, and the collision was terrific. Speedy managed to brush away some of the stars, and get back to his feet, only to fall over something. He thought it was the man, but his groping fingers encountered what seemed to be a heavy sack.

As he got to his feet, a gun blasted at him, and the bullet hit the building near him. A man yelled something, but Speedy didn't hear what he said. Still dazed and weaving on his feet, he grasped the sack and started for the street. Near the sidewalk he fell down, and flung the sack.

Boots were clattering on the sidewalk, as Speedy got to his feet and fairly fell over the edge of the high sidewalk. Men met him and yanked him to his feet. Speedy was unable to tell them what happened. He dimly recognized Jud Holcomb, the sheriff, who was holding him against the wall.

Filthy was yelling, "Bank robbery, Jud! Come around to the back door!"

They took Speedy with them—handcuffed. Two men were taking the ropes and gag from the banker. It was all confusing to Speedy. He saw Tombstone, taller than any of the others. The banker was trying to explain that he had come to the bank after supper, and two men had jumped him. They made him open the safe, which they cleaned out.

"Take a look at this feller," said the

sheriff, shoving Speedy close to the banker. "We found him in the alley makin' a getaway."

The banker was short and heavy-set. He blinked his small eyes at Speedy.

"That is one of them!" he declared. "I recognize him perfectly."

"Where's yore pardner?" asked Holcomb, shaking Speedy.

"My pardner?" asked Speedy. "I dunno what yuh mean, unless it's that tall one over there, Sheriff. What's he got to do with all this ruckus?"

"He means the feller who helped yuh rob the bank," explained Tombstone soberly.

"Oh, there yuh are!" exclaimed Jud Holcomb. "Where was you when this happened?"

"Over in the Eldorado Saloon, playin' poker," replied Tombstone.

"That's right, Jud," said a cowboy. "I was in the game with him."

"But where's the other critter?" asked the sheriff. "Better talk fast, Smith."

Speedy rubbed his sore head, and Filthy Weed got a bright idea.

"I've got it, Jud!" he exclaimed. "This feller helped another feller rob the bank, and then Smith's pardner doublecrossed him,"

"Doublecrossed him?" queried the sheriff.

"Yeah—busted him over the head and took all the loot for himself."

"That's what I've been thinkin' all the time," said the sheriff. "All right, Smith, maybe a few days in jail will loosen yore tongue."

Alvin Connor, the banker, said vehemently, "They ought to hang men like him."

"How much did they get?" asked Filthy Weed.

"I—I don't know," replied the banker wearily. "I'll have to check to find out how much. I—I think it was about forty thousand dollars more or less—probably more."

Tombstone followed them down to the jail, but didn't talk with Speedy.

"You ort to be proud—runnin' around with a feller like that," Filthy Weed said to Tombstone.

Tombstone put his right hand against Filthy's face and shoved very hard. Filthy's head was only about a foot from the wall, and the concussion knocked a framed picture off the wall, but Filthy wasn't interested. He just sat down on the floor and began counting his fingers.

"Next time, don't get so impulsive," Tombstone said quietly, and walked out.

Speedy sat down in his cell and held his head in his hands. The whole thing was rather hazy in his mind. He remembered running into somebody, and he remembered tossing the sack under the sidewalk. He decided to keep his mouth shut. If he told where he threw the sack of loot, they would have a complete case against him.

"Yuh might as well talk Smith," declared Jud Holcomb. "We've got yuh over a barrel. If yore pardner doublecrossed yuh, why shield him? Make a clean breast of it all, and I'll maybe help yuh git yore sentence cut down to—say, ten years."

Speedy didn't even look up, as he said quietly, "Dear Sheriff: Yore offer received and noted carefully. Go out on the sidewalk in front of the office, stick yore heel into that knothole—and this time I hope you break yore fool neck."

TOMBSTONE went back to the hotel and sat down in his room, lonesome for the first time in his life. He knew that Speedy had had no part in the robbery, but realized that fate had dealt him a bad hand. The worst of it was the fact that Alvin Connor, the banker, had positively identified Speedy.

"He was so scared that he wouldn't know an elephant from a cottontail rabbit," Tombstone told himself. "There wasn't any light either. Jones, you've got to use yore brains."

Tombstone went down to the little Chinese restaurant and ate a meal. He was finishing as Filthy Weed and Jud Holcomb came in. The two officers came over to his table and sat down.

"Smith refuses to talk—except to make smart remarks," Jud said.

"He's good at it, too," declared Tombstone. "He never stuck up that bank, Holcomb."

"The banker identified him."

"Yeah, I know—but he'd have identified anybody. Scared stiff. How can yuh identify anybody in the dark? Didn't Speedy have anythin' to say?"

"Yeah," nodded Filthy, "he said he had a toothache."

"How much did the bank lose?" asked Tombstone.

Jud Holcomb looked grimly at Tombstone as he replied quietly, "That's the worst angle to this thing, Jones; they cleaned out the bank. Not a dime left."

"What makes it the *worst* angle?"

"Because it'll break everybody in this country. The bank ain't got a cent to pay off the depositors. As far as money is concerned, the Double S and the Box Eighty-eight are both busted, along with everybody else who had enough to put into a bank."

"Speedy better talk," declared Filthy Weed.

"Why had he better talk?" asked Tombstone.

"Some of them folks are bound to want to know where their money went, Tombstone," replied Filthy. "This dog-gone jail ain't built to keep folks out—if they want in very badly."

"I see what yuh mean," nodded Tombstone.

"Aw, I don't think they'd hang him for a couple days," said Filthy. "They'll give him time to talk."

"But if he ain't got nothin' to talk about?" queried Tombstone.

"Well, in that case, they might figure he's plain stubborn."

NEXT ISSUE

BORDER MAN

A Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER III

Help Wanted

TOMBSTONE came downstairs in the hotel next morning and Ezra Miles met him with a telegram, which had come that morning. Tombstone couldn't read it, so he took a chance on Ezra, who admitted that he could read a little. The telegram was from Jim Keaton, and said:

IF FREE TO WORK AGAIN CONTACT MRS. WESTON BOX EIGHTY-EIGHT. CONFIRM RECEIPT OF THIS TELEGRAM AT ONCE.

"You won't get no job at the Eighty-eight," declared Ezra. "Ma Weston don't need no help—and she's awful careful who she hires. Ain't you been free to work before this?"

"It's shore confusin'," admitted Tombstone. "Will you write me a telegram?"

"Shore," agreed Ezra.

He looked curiously at Tombstone when he gave the name and address, wondering what connection this dumb cowpoke could have with the Cattlemen's Association. The telegram, as dictated, read:

SPEEDY ROBBED THE BANK HERE LAST NIGHT AND WON'T TELL WHERE HE HID THE MONEY. BETTER SEND ME A HUNDRED DOLLARS TO COVER EXPENSES UNTIL HE TALKS. MRS. WESTON DON'T WANT NO HELP.

"That ort to explain everythin'," said Tombstone proudly.

"It shore does—kinda," agreed Ezra. "You send it at the depot."

Tombstone paid for the telegram at the depot and wandered down to the sheriff's office, where Jud Holcomb had just arrived.

Tombstone said, "I'd like to have a talk with Speedy."

"Well, shore—I reckon it won't do no harm—but I'll have to listen in on it."

"Go ahead, we ain't got no secrets."

The sheriff hammered on the door, decided that his deputy had gone to breakfast, and managed to unlock the door. From the office another locked door guarded the corridor to the cells. They went down the short corridor and Tombstone called,

"Hyah, Speedy! Long time no see yuh, feller."

But there was no reply from Speedy. They went up to the bars of the cell and looked in on Filthy Weed, all tied up and gagged, lying on the narrow cot and glaring at them with bloodshot eyes. The keys to the cells were lying on the floor, inside the cell. The sheriff fished them out with a broom, opened the cell, and cut his deputy loose.

Filthy had been hit on the head, as a sizable lump attested, but he was too mad to think about physical hurts. He spat out some pieces of chewed-up rag, and glared at Jud Holcomb.

"What happened?" asked the sheriff.

"I got me an attack!" replied Filthy. "Somebody jumped me—and I woke up like you found me."

"That's funny—Speedy's gone," said Tombstone.

"What's funny about it?" asked the sheriff.

"It ain't like him—goin' away like that and never sayin' anythin' to me."

JUD HOLCOMB snorted disgustedly and said to Filthy, "Didn't you see nothin'—hear nothin'?"

"I saw stars and heard soft music," groaned Filthy. "I said to myself, 'Elmer, yuh're in heaven.' That's what I said."

"Heaven, eh? You better have Doc look at yore head."

"Aw, that lump ain't bad."

"I didn't say anythin' about a lump."

"That," sighed Filthy, "has all the ingredients of a dirty remark. If yuh don't mind, I'll go git some strong coffee."

Tombstone went over to the livery stable and talked with the man in charge. Speedy's horse and riding rig were still there. Over at the hotel, Jud Holcomb leaned on the desk and looked sadly at Ezra Miles. Ezra had lost money, too. The bank was closed, and without money, it seemed a permanent condition. Ma Weston came in, and Jud groaned audibly. She looked the sheriff over, her jaw tight.

"So you lost the only chance we have to get our money back," she said, more in sorrow than in anger.

"He had outside help," said Jud wearily. "I'm sorry."

"Outside help, eh? Where's that long geared partner of his?"

"He was playin' poker in the Eldorado, when it happened."

"They locked Elmer in the same cell," added Ezra.

"If it wasn't so painful, I'd laugh," said Ma Weston. "Don't you realize I've lost every cent I owned?"

"Buck Shawn got cleaned, too," remarked Ezra. "Couple, three days ago he put all the money from his last shipment of cows in the bank. Buck's fit to be tied."

"Buck Shawn don't mean nothin' to me," declared Ma Weston.

"Yeah, I know," muttered Jud reflectively. "Have yuh heard from the Association yet?"

"Not a word. What are you goin' to do,

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Ever notice how some fellows is like mules? They'll pull good when they get goin'. But you gotta build a fire under 'em to get 'em started.

Jud Holcomb? Bank robbers bust everybody in the country, and all you do is go around with a long face. Why did they elect you?"

"I'm doin' my best," sighed the sheriff. "In a thing like this, yuh don't know where to start in." He yanked his hat down and walked out.

Ezra said, "I'm glad he's gone—I've got somethin' to tell yuh."

Miles proceeded to tell Ma Weston about the telegram Tombstone Jones had received from the Cattlemen's Association, and the reply he had sent them. She listened attentively, finally exploding with, "Ezra, you're crazy! That sandhill crane *can't* be a detective!"

"I'm a-tellin' yuh the truth, Miz Weston," he insisted. "It didn't say he *was* a detective—it said for him to contact you."

Tombstone came in and Ma Weston looked him over.

"Any news from yore pardner, Jones?" Ezra asked.

Tombstone shook his head soberly, as he replied, "I got a mental message from him, that's all."

"A—a mental message?" asked Ezra. "How's it done?"

"Oh, it's simple. He thinks something, and my mind picks it up."

Ma Weston breathed, "Good heavens!"

"I'll be darned!" exclaimed Ezra, interested. "What's he say?"

"He said, 'Havin' a good time, wish you was here.' "

"But—but where is he?"

"He didn't say."

Tombstone went on up the stairs, leaving Ma Weston and Ezra to look at each other, both shaking their heads. Ezra said, "Well, what do yuh think, Miz Weston?"

"Men have been shot for less," she replied, and walked out.

Ezra shook his head thoughtfully, as he muttered, "Mental message. Huh! Didn't say where he was, eh? Why, the postmark would show—no, that don't help none. Ezry, you're as crazy as the rest of 'em."

Jud Holcomb was having a very unpleasant day. He was getting almost as much blame as the bank robbers. He had a talk with Alvin Connor, the banker, who swore that Speedy Smith was one of the two robbers.

"I've lost everything I've worked for," mourned Connor. "Money gone, bank gone. I'll have to go somewhere else and start all over again. My heart bleeds for the depositors."

"It does, huh?" remarked the sheriff. "There wasn't much blood in it, when anybody tried to borrow money from yore bank, Alvin."

"Bad risks, most of them," sighed Connor. "Perhaps I should have let them borrow the money."

"Bank robbers," declared Jud Holcomb wisely, "never leave any collateral."

BUCK SHAWN came to town, very, very hot around the collar. He was inclined to take it out of Alvin Connor's hide, until Jud Holcomb pointed out the low price of hides on the open market. Shawn was mad at everybody, especially Jud Holcomb, Judge Conway, Ma Weston, Hailstorm Williams and Tombstone Jones. Buck's jaw was still sore from Tombstone's punch.

"You swung at him first, Buck," Filthy reminded.

"I was too mad to swing straight. What I want to know is who blotted that calf brand, and who stole that misbranded hide?"

"What I want to know is who robbed the bank and who took Smith out of jail," said the sheriff.

"You've both got a lot of unfilled wants, seems to me," remarked Filthy.

"What do you know about this Jones person?" asked Shawn. "Where does he fit into this deal? After all, he came here with Smith."

"I've been thinkin' about him," admitted the sheriff. "Yeah, when yuh come to think of it, where does he fit in?"

Jud turned to Filthy and said, "You've known Smith a long time, Elmer. What was he doin' the last time you seen him?"

"He was in jail for horse stealin', Jud."

"Yuh see?" queried Shawn. "He's worth investigatin'."

"You mean Smith?"

"No, I mean Jones."

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Tombstone was sprawled in a chair, watching a poker game in the Eldorado Saloon when Buck Shawn and Steve Parnell came in. The foreman of the Double S still had a swollen nose, and one eye was rather mauve. They had a drink at the bar, and Shawn's roving eye centered on Tombstone, who grinned and nodded. The others in the place, knowing what had happened in front of the courthouse, tried to appear indifferent, but were watching with interest.

One poker player got up, asked to be dealt out for the hand and walked out of line between Shawn and Tombstone. The dealer, speaking very quietly, said, "Highpockets, would you mind moving aside for the time being?"

"For the time being what?" asked Tombstone. The gambler shrugged and began dealing.

Slowly Tombstone uncoiled and got to his feet, looking at Shawn lazily, as he said, "Would yuh mind sheddin' yore horns, Shawn? Yuh're makin' the boys nervous."

Shawn's thin lips twitched, but he said nothing.

"Are you tryin' to start trouble?" Parnell asked.

Tombstone laughed quietly. "The *boys* are nervous—not me," he said slowly. "I never start trouble."

"If yuh want trouble, you can get it," said Shawn in a brittle voice.

"I said I never start trouble—but I quit crawlin', when I learned to walk."

"Yuh're a cool customer," remarked Shawn.

"I ain't cool—I'm hot," corrected Tombstone. "They arrested my pardner for somethin' he never done, and some halfwitted fools took him out of the jail, thinkin' he knows where the money went."

"You seem sure of that," remarked Shawn.

"I know my pardner."

"By the way," said Shawn, "I understand that he served time for stealin' horses."

"Who told you that lie?" asked Tombstone quickly.

"Oh, I heard it," replied Shawn.

"Then yuh better git Filthy Weed to tell yuh *all* the story."

"So Filthy Weed knew about it, eh?"

"Go and ask him *who* stole the horses."

"Yeah, I'll prob'ly do that, Jones."

"Fine. Yuh know, it seems to me that you've got enough trouble with folks that yuh know well, without brawlin' with strangers."

"What do yuh mean?"

"Well, for instance, me and my pardner came the day of the trial, so yuh can't blame us for the switch in hides and the ventin' of the brand on the calf. That was all ahead of our time. If I was you, I'd kinda find out who pulled them jobs, Shawn. After that's all settled—and you still don't like me—we can git together."

Buck Shawn looked at Tombstone thoughtfully for several moments.

"That sounds like a good idea," he said slowly, and turned back to the bar.

"That goes for yore pardner, too, Jones; I ain't forgot that punch in the nose," Steve Parnell said.

"He'll be glad to accommodate yuh if yuh ain't got his hands tied," replied Tombstone soberly.

LATER that afternoon Jud Holcomb received a telegram from Jim Keaton, which read:

> WIRE ME DETAILS OF ROBBERY AND ARREST OF SPEEDY SMITH. MUST BE A MISTAKE. ASK TOMBSTONE JONES TO WIRE HIS VERSION.

Jud was unable to find Tombstone before suppertime, but decided to find him later. In fact, Jud didn't know exactly what to wire Jim Keaton. He wondered why Keaton said it must be a mistake. After a lengthy consideration of things, he wired:

BANK BUSTED BY TWO MEN. SMITH CAPTURED AT THE SCENE, BEEN HIT ON THE HEAD AND REFUSED TO TALK. OUTSIDE HELP GOT HIM OUT OF JAIL AND HE DISAPPEARED. JONES WAS IN POKER GAME AT TIME. WILL SHOW HIM YOUR WIRE.

Tombstone spent the evening at the livery-stable, talking with the stableman who had been in Sunset Wells for several years. He wanted to find out all he could about the different people, trying to figure out who would have taken Speedy out of jail. There were only the three cattle outfits—the Box 88, the Double S and the Circle 7. The stableman wanted to help Tombstone, but his information was of very little value. He said,

"Well, it's a cinch it wasn't Ma Weston's outfit. Buck Shawn had no reason for doin' it, and Hailstorm Wilson is as square as a nut. He's mean and ornery, cusses everybody, but he's honest."

"There's only one thing you've left me to do," sighed Tombstone.

"What's that?" asked the man.

"Find out who done it."

"Well, yeah, you can do that," admitted the stableman. "It's kinda funny, but I never thought of that. He-e-ey! What are we talkin' about? We're back where we started."

"Short trip," remarked Tombstone and walked out.

Ezra Miles was sitting in the little lobby, when Tombstone came in, and he said, "I thought you was upstairs."

"What made yuh think that?" asked Tombstone.

"Oh, I dunno. Yuh see, Jud Holcomb came in a while ago and asked if you was up in yore room, and I said I thought yuh was."

"What'd he want?" asked Tombstone.

"He didn't say, he just went upstairs."

"He did, huh? How long ago?"

"Oh, maybe fifteen, twenty minutes ago. He never came down."

"Well, yuh don't reckon he's still waitin' up there, do yuh?"

"I dunno. He's a mighty patient man, Jud is."

"Yeah, I noticed he is. He's waitin' for the bank robbers to come in and give themselves up."

Tombstone went upstairs and into his room, where he lighted a lamp. Jud Holcomb wasn't there. Tombstone decided that Jud must have left by way of the back stairs, and was sitting down to take off his boots when he saw a peculiar mark on the cheap wallpaper near the door.

It was a blood streak, still damp. There was more blood on the floor beside the door, too—still smeary to his fingers. Tombstone flung open the door and went to the stairway, where he called to Ezra Miles.

Together they examined the blood streak and smear on the floor, took the lamp and examined the floor along the hallway. There were scattered drops of blood all the way to the rear stairway which led down to the back yard, and there were more drops on the stairs.

They were about to go back up the stairs, when Tombstone held the lamp high, looking out into the open yard. There was something out there, which didn't look exactly like debris.

It was Jud Holcomb, sprawled in the dirt, blood seeping from his scalp, which had been beaten and cut.

Ezra blurted, "My land, they've killed Jud Holcomb!" and started running for the stairs.

"Come back here—he ain't dead," Tombstone said.

Ezra stopped and came back slowly. "Ain't dead?" he asked huskily. "How can yuh tell?"

"Dead men don't bleed. At least, none that I've ever killed done any bleedin'. Go and get a doctor *muy pronto.*"

TOMBSTONE hunched on his heels and watched Jud Holcomb, while Ezra sounded the alarm. The sheriff was still breathing, but he had been badly beaten. Several men came with Ezra and the doctor. One was Alvin Connor, the banker, and another was Filthy Weed. Ezra had explained all he knew about it.

Filthy asked, "Doc, is he goin' to die?"

"Sometime, of course," replied the doctor. "Maybe this time. Get a blanket and help carry him down to my office. I can't do anything here in the dirt and with you waving the lamp around."

They carried Jud down to the doctor's place, but Tombstone and Ezra didn't go down there. Ezra went back to his desk, but Tombstone wandered over to the livery stable again. The stable man was half asleep in the tack room and knew nothing about the troubles of Sheriff Holcomb. Tombstone didn't mention it, as he sat down and rolled a cigarette.

He was beginning to realize that someone had made a mistake. Why would anyone go to his room to beat up the sheriff and then dump him in the back yard of the hotel? It didn't make sense—yet. He was sitting there, trying to puzzle things out, when someone came in. He couldn't hear what was said out there, but the stable man came back to the tack room and began taking down a buggy harness.

"Somebody goin' for a ride?" asked Tombstone.

"Yea-a-ah. Alvin Connor said he was too nervous to sleep, so he wants me to bring a single rig down to his place, so he can take a ride."

"He's the banker, ain't he?" asked Tombstone.

"He was—when he had a bank."

"Where does he live?" Tombstone was especially interested in the location of Connor's abode—he merely wanted conversation.

"Down that street on the other side of the hotel," replied the man, and went out with the harness.

"Can't sleep, huh?" said Tombstone to himself. "Neither can I. By golly, I'll take a ride, too. What's sauce for the goose is—whatchacallit?"

The stable man was driving a gray horse out of the stable, as Tombstone threw a saddle on his horse, and a minute later the tall cowpoke rode out of the big

[*Turn page*]

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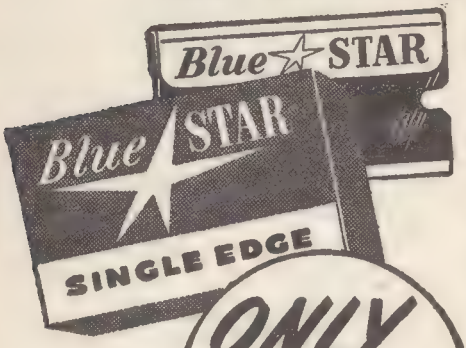

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doors and went slowly up the main street past the hotel. Tombstone had no destination in mind.

He was a mile out of town, when he heard the rattle of buggy wheels, turned off the road into the brush and let the buggy team go past. In the moonlight he recognized the horse which the stableman had harnessed, a gray, traveling at top speed. Tombstone reined back into the dusty road, fanned the dust away from his face with his hat, and remarked aloud to his horse, "Can't sleep, so he goes for a ride, eh? At that speed, I shore hope he don't git sleepy all of a sudden."

When he came to the forks of the road, the dust cloud hovered over the right-hand fork, indicating that the buggy had gone in that direction.

"Still foggin'," he told himself. "For a sleepy guy, he's shore goin' some'ers awful fast. A busted banker goin' some'ers. Maybe I'll foller and pick up the pieces in case he goes to sleep."

CHAPTER IV

Tombstone Rides Away

SPEEDY SMITH was having a very bad time. Just now he was tied, hand and foot, and blindfolded, stretched out on a very hard floor, where he had been most of the time since some men, working in the dark, had taken him out of a comfortable jail. Speedy didn't know exactly what had happened at the jail, because one of the men had hit him over the head when he objected to leaving a comfortable bed.

Every few hours they had dragged him out into a lighted room and plied him with questions regarding what he had done with the bank loot. When he refused to talk, they banged him around roughly until he ached in every muscle. They even held a hot iron close to his eyes, swearing to burn away his eyesight, unless he told them the truth.

Just now he was between treatments. They had explained to him that he had got the money and passed it to his pardner.

Speedy had said, "Find that pardner."

He heard a man say quietly, "It can't be the string bean, 'cause he was in a poker game at the Eldorado."

"Who said he was?" demanded a voice angrily.

"I don't know who said it. I got it second-handed."

A few hours later, stretched out in the same spot, Speedy heard them talking in the next room, and a man said, "This Smith is a horse thief. They're talkin' about it in town. Buck Shawn made the crack in the Eldorado, and Jones called him for it."

"Called Buck?" queried an incredulous voice.

"He shore did. He's the same hairpin who knocked Buck out in front of the courthouse."

There was a lot of more talk, which Speedy couldn't hear, except for an occasional word.

That was hours ago, it seemed. With the black cloth over his eyes, Speedy was unable to tell daylight from darkness. He had no idea what time it was, but his ears caught the sound of galloping horses, as somebody rode up to the ranch-house—or whatever the place was—he was in. He heard a door bang, as someone slammed it very hard, a babel of voices, most of which had all the violence of profanity.

FINALLY the conversation became more coherent, and he heard a heavy voice say, "Bungled again! What's the matter with you fellers? Can't yuh do anything right?"

"All right, all right!" rasped another voice. "How'd we know? It was as dark as the inside of a black cat. We heard him fussin' with the door knob, and I said, 'Come in.'"

"You fool!" snapped the heavy voice. "Askin' a man to come into his own room. You should know better."

"Wait a minute! We ain't all perfect.

He came in and we banged into him. I hit him with the barrel of my six-gun, and I thought he was cold as ice. We packed him down in the back yard. He was as limp as an empty sack. I thought he was dead. No use packin' a dead man over to the buckboard, I figured; so I laid him down and lighted a match to look at him."

"That was pay day," said the other voice. "He was lookin' up at us. I tell yuh he knowed both of us."

"What did yuh do?" asked heavy voice anxiously.

"What could we do, except to leave him there?"

"You mean—you finished him—there?"

"We hit him twice," said the third voice wearily. "We didn't dare use a gun on him."

"You killed the sheriff, eh? Of all the bunglin' fools I ever knew. All right, all right. Take a reef in yore nerves. Both of yuh shakin' in the knees. Nobody knows yuh done it. But we ain't no nearer to gettin' the money than we was before."

"I'm ready to pull out," declared one of the men. "Next thing we know, this valley will be full of man hunters."

"Gettin' yaller over a killin', eh? Willin' to pull out flat broke, eh? Not me! We're goin' to get that money. If we had Jones—one of 'em will talk. They both know where the money is. I'll beat that little shrimp until he'll be glad to talk."

"That's fine! That's usin' brains. If yuh kill him, who'll ever find out anythin'? You want Jones out here, so yuh can use one against the other. All right, let's get Jones. One swallow don't make a summer."

"Wait a minute," said the man who wanted to pull out. "Jones ain't no dumb fool. He'd know we made a mistake. Anybody'd know that much. I ain't runnin' my neck into a rope. And you remember what Ma Weston said about Jones and his mental message."

"Mental message! He lied to Ma. Nobody can do that."

"Maybe he wasn't lyin'. I seen a feller in Phoenix one night who could tell yuh what you're thinkin' about. I didn't believe it either, so I tried him out. He says, 'Yuh're thinkin' about a girl in Tucson.' I says, That's right, Mister. What's her name?' He says, 'Her name is Nancy.' I says, 'Yuh're wrong—her name is Pansy. Her twin sister is Nancy.' He says, 'Can you tell 'em apart when yuh're with 'em?' and I says, 'It's shore awful tough, Mister.' And he says, 'Well, if you can't tell 'em apart when yuh're with 'em, how can I tell 'em apart this far from Tucson?' "

"What do yuh mean by mental message?" asked the heavy voice.

"Well," explained the speaker, "Jones said he got a mental message from Smith, but Smith forgot to tell him where he was."

"If Smith don't know, he can't tell him."

"I never thought of that before. Well, that's better. . . ."

Back in Sunset Wells, Filthy Weed was very upset and unhappy over it all. Jud Holcomb, his head swathed in bandages, was still unconscious at the doctor's home. The doctor refused to express an opinion as to the outcome. Jud Holcomb had been badly beaten, and his life was in the balance.

Filthy tried to find Tombstone Jones, but Tombstone wasn't at the hotel or the Eldorado Saloon. Filthy talked with Ezra Mills, who told him about Jud Holcomb going up to Tombstone's room about fifteen minutes before Tombstone came in.

"Ah-hah! So that's how he done it!" Filthy exclaimed.

"Done what?" asked Ezra.

"How he done what?" queried Filthy. "Look, Ezra! Jud went up to the room, met Tombstone Jones and they fought. Tombstone thought he killed Jud, packed him down into the back yard, dumped him there, and comes in here, loaded with innocence."

"Yuh're psychic, Filthy!" exclaimed Ezra.

"Wait a minute, Ezry! Before yuh call me names—look at it right."

"Psychic means," explained Ezra, "that you can see things that others can't see."

"Like delirium tremens, huh?"

THE little, bowlegged stable man came in and asked Filthy how Jud Holcomb was getting along.

"He's awful low, Mike," replied Filthy. "You ain't seen Tombstone Jones lately have yuh?"

"Yeah, a while ago. He came over to the stable after the trouble out here. I took a rig out, and when I came back he was gone, and so was his horse and ridin' rig. He musta gone some place."

"Ah-hah!" breathed Filthy. "He got scared and pulled out. Ezra, I told yuh what happened! Which way did he go, Mike?"

"I said he was gone when I came back. How'd I know which way he went?"

"Yeah, I reckon you couldn't. You ain't psychic."

"I ain't what?" asked Mike soberly.

"Ezra can explain it," replied Filthy. "I've got to round up some of the boys and take out after Tombstone Jones."

"Which way?" asked Ezra.

"Yeah, that's right—we don't know which way. Huh! Yuh know, I run into more danged problems. Mike, who got the rig from you—the one you took out, when Tombstone Jones pulled out."

"Oh, that was Alvin Connor, the banker. When he can't sleep, he allus takes a buggy ride at night."

"He's been awful upset over the bank," said Ezra. "He's got a lot on his mind. The bank examiner is due down here, Alvin said, and he'll officially close the bank."

"I had fifteen dollars in there," remarked Mike. "A feller hates to save for a year and have it all swept away like that. Makes yuh leary of savin' money. How much did you lose, Filthy?"

"Forty-six dollars and thirty-five cents."

"How come yuh had so much in the bank?"

"Savin' up to buy a bicycle."

"For heaven's sake, Filthy!" exclaimed Ezra Miles. "A bicycle? In this country?"

Filthy looked defiantly at Ezra. "You heard me," he said coldly.

"Yeah, I know—but give me jist one reason why anybody'd buy a bicycle in this country."

"They don't eat oats," replied Filthy and walked out.

"Well," said Mike, "he gave yuh one reason. Oats *are* kinda high right now."

Ezra scratched his head thoughtfully, his eyes grave.

"Yuh know somethin', Mike," he said quietly. "It could be that Filthy Weed is losin' his mind."

"In theory, yeah," nodded Mike, "but in practice, no. Yuh can't lose somethin' yuh never had, Ezra."

"Yeah, I overlooked that little de-tail. Huh! He thinks Tombstone Jones beat up Jud Holcomb, dumped him into the yard, and then played innocent. Yeah, it's possible. How does this Tombstone person strike you, Mike?"

"Well, I'd say he was above the average in intelligence, Ezry."

Buck Shawn and Steve Parnell came in. They had heard about the trouble, but wanted to find out what Ezra Miles knew about it. It didn't take Ezra long to tell them all he knew.

Buck Shawn said, "Weed wants us to ride with him, tryin' to find Jones. Right now, it's a wild-goose chase, we figure. Nobody knows which way he went."

"Where'd Filthy go?" asked Ezra.

"He got mad," replied Buck. "Said he was goin' out and get Hailstorm and his two men to ride with him. Filthy is gettin' temperamental, seems like."

"We didn't refuse to go with him," explained Parnell, "but we argued with him over where to go, and he got mad."

"Didn't offer to deputize yuh, eh?"

"I guess he never thought of it," smiled Shawn. "Neither did we."

"Anyway, he pulled out," said Parnell. "Let's go down to Doc's place and see how Jud is gettin' along, Buck. . . ."

It had been quite a while since Speedy had been interrogated, and he had never ceased to work on his ropes. Someone had done a very good job on him, but Speedy never had any idea of giving up. His wrists were rubbed raw, but he had a feeling that there had been a slip somewhere along the line, because one wrist

rope was getting looser. Speedy's hands were rather small, and he could feel that this one hand was beginning to make some headway toward a break.

If those men would only delay things for a little while, there might be a chance. He heard the rattle of a wheeled vehicle, as it came up outside. At first there was only a confused babble of voices in the next room, then a man swore bitterly—a long list of disconnected profanity. Speedy had the loop almost off his wrist, but stopped work long enough to hear a man say:

"You didn't kill him, you crazy bunglers!"

Everybody seemed to be talking at the same time, making accusations and counter-accusations. The heavy voice roared, "Shut up, all of you! That's better. You didn't kill him—that much is settled. He recognized both of yuh. All right, what's to be done next? As soon as he wakes up, our goose is well cooked."

"Our best bet is to find that money and pull out."

"Yeah, that's fine," remarked a sarcastic voice. "We've got the only man who can tell us where it is, and he won't talk. Next thing we know the law will come out here to roost. Who started all this wonderful deal, anyway? Cause trouble, get even with somebody. Steal their cows and start a range war. Bust the bank and split up the money. Fine! Now look where we're settin'!"

Another man spoke too quietly for Speedy to hear what he was saying, but a different voice blurted:

"Association detectives? Yuh're crazy! Them two? I don't care if Jud Holcomb did have a telegram in his pocket. Them two was here, before Ma Weston ever thought of askin' the association for help. A couple of driftin' horse thieves, and you say they're association detectives. A fine lookin' pair of specimens."

Speedy slipped the rope off his wrists, pushed up the blindfold and left it on top of his head, as he looked into the darkness of the room. A thin sliver of light came from the next room where the voices were. As far as Speedy could see, there was no other door, nor even a window. Quietly he removed the ropes from his legs and began flexing his almost useless muscles.

CHAPTER V

Dynamite and Torture

IT WAS a ranch, but Tombstone had no idea whose ranch it was. In the moonlight he could see the horse and buggy at the front of the house, and he wondered why the banker was in such a hurry to get out here. Tombstone got off his horse, leaving it in the heavy shadows of a sycamore near the house. Tombstone was a cautious soul. With Speedy missing and the sheriff close to death, he was in no mood to take long chances. After all, this was a strange place, and the hurried trip of Alvin Connor had made him suspicious.

He worked his way around the rambling old ranch-house and down to the big stable. A team and buckboard were down there, tied to the corral fence. He felt of the horses and found that they were still wet from a fast trip. Then he went back and looked the old ranch-house over again. The windows were covered, but showed that there was a light in the place. He could hear voices, but the conversation was too muffled for him to hear more than the sounds.

He went back to the stable and hunkered down near the buckboard and team. For some reason the team had not been unhitched, and Tombstone reasoned that whoever was in the house might be going to use it.

"Maybe they're goin' to use it for a getaway," he told himself. "Somethin' ain't right about this deal."

But after sober contemplation he decided that he was yelling 'wolf!' when there might not be any wolves. After all, he didn't know what was going on in the house. Alvin Connor had a perfect right

to drive out there.

He said, half-aloud, "Jones, yuh're gettin' yourself into a razzle-dazzle. Losin' yore pardner has made yuh kinda nonplussed. Grab onto yoreself and have a little sense. This ain't no way for a growed-up man to act."

He hunkered on his heels between the buckboard and the fence and tried to make himself believe that he didn't feel the need of a cigarette.

He heard the door of the house open, and could see several men in the doorway, talking. Then the door banged shut and two men came down toward the stable. They were almost to the door, when one of them said, "I don't like the idea a little bit."

"Neither do I, but what can we do? It's the best way out. All we've got to do is get in close to town, sneak in and place the stuff under the house, use a long fuse and get out of there."

"Yeah, I realize all that—but—"

"But what?"

"But I don't like it. Doc ain't a bad feller. As far as that goes, Jud ain't a bad feller. And there might be more folks in the house."

"That's their hard luck. We've got to get rid of Holcomb before he recovers and tells what he knows. It'll be a cinch, I tell yuh. If we don't— All right, suppose we high-tail it out of here? What's the answer? Law on our tails the rest of our lives. What they don't know won't hurt 'em. See what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know. If Holcomb tells 'em and then dies, it's murder."

"I'm glad yuh're gettin' some sense. You get the dynamite, while I find the fuse and caps. Take at least a dozen sticks."

They went into the stable and lighted a lantern. Tombstone got slowly to his feet. These two men were going to Sunset Wells to kill Jud Holcomb and anyone else who happened to be in the doctor's home.

HE MOVED in between the buckboard and the horses and quickly unhooked the tugs on both singletrees. Then he backed away, crawled through the fence and sprawled flat in the heavy shadows as the two men came out, extinguishing the lantern at the doorway. One of the men untied the horses, while the other climbed into the seat. The team danced nervously, as the other man crawled into the seat. Quickly the team was cramped around, swinging the buckboard, but as the team straightened out one of the men yelped in amazement. The team was going ahead, but the buckboard merely sloughed around a few feet and came to a stop. The team, frightened for the moment, broke into a swift gallop, and went straight toward the main gate, as the two men piled out.

"What happened?" gasped one of the men.

"Somebody unhooked the tugs!" exclaimed the other, and raced for the house. After a moment the other one also went galloping toward the house. Tombstone saw them kick the door open and go inside, banging the door behind them.

On the buckboard seat was a rifle, a package of dynamite, a box of detonators and about thirty feet of fuse. Tombstone put all the stuff on the ground at the corner of the stable, and waited for the next move.

"Them boys ain't honest," he muttered. "If they was, they wouldn't have run away, when they lost their team. Yuh know, I wonder if Speedy is in that house. Huh! That's a idea."

While Tombstone tried to figure out some way to find out what was going on inside the house, Speedy was getting some information from the conversation in the main room. Speedy had his ropes all off, the blindfold still on top of his head, but he was hunched against the connecting door, listening to some very puzzled men. Very profane, too, he thought.

He had heard the plans to dynamite the doctor's house, and he had heard the two men come back swiftly, explaining, out of breath, that someone had unhitched their buckboard team. The third member scoffed at the idea, accusing them of cow-

ardice and of seeking a way out of the dynamiting scheme. It seemed to Speedy that their former friendly relationship was becoming strained.

Accusations and counter-accusations flew too fast for Speedy to understand all of them, until one man said:

"The whole blamed deal was yours, and you know it. If there's been any bunglin', it's because you didn't plan things right."

"How'd I know them two crazy fools were comin'?" queried a voice wearily. "If it hadn't been for them, we'd have been all right. I had the Box Eighty-eight and the Double S clawing at each other's throat, until them two saddle-bums came along."

"Clawin'—yeah," said a voice sarcastically. "You hate Ma Weston and Buck Shawn. You wanted to ruin both outfits, so you could steal enough money from the bank to buy both spreads."

"What are you kickin' about? You'd get yore share?"

"I'm going back to town," announced a voice quietly. "After all, I can do nothing out here."

"You ain't goin' nowhere," declared one of the men. "Yuh know I've been thinkin' about somethin'. How do we know that you didn't doublecross all of us?"

"Doublecross? I don't understand you."

"Yuh don't, eh? What would stop you from havin' somebody planted to take the money away from us?"

"Why, that is ridiculous!"

"Yeah? Well, you ain't goin' no place, until we find out where that money went."

"But I had nothing to do with it. I am not a fool."

"Maybe not. Maybe none of us are, but we'd have a hell of a time provin' we ain't. And you listen, old-timer! Somebody unhooked the tugs from that buckboard, somebody that's prob'ly out there right now."

"And probably Tombstone Jones," added another."

"All right!" rasped the heavy voice. "Yuh're guessin'. Nobody can put the deadwood on any of us. Nobody knows Smith is here. They think he quit the country. We'll make Smith talk. Oh, yeah, I can. When I get through with the skinny tramp he'll be glad to tell everythin' he knows. Then we'll ditch him in a prospect hole, where not even the buzzards can find him."

"What about Tombstone Jones?"

"Well, what about him? He don't know where Smith is."

"What about them unhooked tugs? We never done it ourselves."

"Yuh're scared, imaginin' things. No reason for him to come out here. Forget it."

IN THE meantime, Tombstone was worried about finding where he could get some information. In the weeds back of the house he fell over an old ladder and skinned one knee. He sat there for a while, trying to figure out just what good the ladder would be, and rubbing his sore knee.

There were no upper windows to try for, and he didn't know just how solid that old roof might be. Finally he carried the ladder over and braced it carefully against the roof. The rungs were not too solid, but he decided they would hold him.

Quietly he climbed up the ladder and took a look at the roof. It was made of shakes, dried and curled. He slid one of them loose and discovered that there was no ceiling to the house, just heavy shakes over thin stripping. He could hear some voices, but was unable to hear what was said.

He carefully removed his boots and spurs, dropping them to the ground, slid off the ladder and began snaking his way very carefully toward the ridge of the roof.

It was a slow process, because he realized that any sound up there could be heard in the house. He reached the ridge and eased himself over the top. It would be easier going down, but more dangerous, because he might not be able to stop on those smooth old shakes.

He had just eased himself over the edge, when he heard a rider coming. Flattening himself on the roof he prayed that the rider could not see him up there. Ap-

parently the rider was not interested in looking at roofs, because he galloped straight up to the rickety porch and dismounted quickly. Tombstone slid down a few feet. The man came up on the porch, knocked on the door and called loudly, "Hailstorm, this is Elmer Weed!"

"Filthy!" breathed Tombstone. "That son-of-a-gun is one of the gang!"

There was a vocal commotion in the house, when Filthy Weed came in, and Tombstone slid down a little further. From there he explored with both hands, until he found a loose shake, and slid it carefully aside for a few inches. There was a terrific argument in progress down there, it seemed. Tombstone couldn't get a clear view of those in the room, but he could hear what was said, and it was plenty.

A voice said harshly, "Why did you come out here, Weed?"

"What's the difference?" asked Filthy. "Stickin' guns into my belly thataway! Give me back my gun, you bat-eared old rannahan!"

Whap! There was a rattle of boot soles, a decided thump on the floor, and a voice rasped, "Keep yore trap shut, you dumb fool. We'll run this party."

"All right, and now what?" snarled the voice. "Next thing we know we'll have the whole blasted town out here. Weed, why did you come out here?"

"That's my business," replied Filthy. "What's goin' on here? What's Connor doin' here? This looks fishy to me."

"Keep yore mouth shut."

After a few moments of silence, Filthy said, "So yuh're the gang who almost killed Jud Holcomb, eh?"

"Keep yore mouth shut, or I'll shut it for keeps. Yuh're gettin' yourself in pretty deep, Weed. Tell me why yuh came here, or I'll pistol whip all yore hair loose."

"I came out here to git you fellers to help me run down Tombstone Jones."

"Help yuh run down Tombstone Jones? Why, what has he done?"

"We thought he beat up Jud Holcomb. I wanted Buck Shawn and his gang to ride with me, but they acted snooty, so I came out here."

The laugh was general except for Filthy Weed.

"So yuh came to get our help, eh? Well of all the crazy things I ever heard! So Tombstone Jones pulled out, eh?"

"All I know is what Mike told me. He took a livery rig out for Connor, and when he came back, Tombstone Jones and his horse were gone. Maybe he follered Connor. I dunno."

AFTER a long silence, one of the men said, "Maybe he followed Connor, eh? Maybe he did."

"Did you tell Buck Shawn where you was goin'?"

"I did," replied Filthy. "I said I was comin' here to get you to ride with me. I should have brought the posse here."

"Don't act smart, Weed. Your goose is almost cooked. We've got to find out if Jones is around here."

"Go out and call his name," suggested Filthy. "He's dumb enough to walk in."

"Wait a minute!" The man with the heavy voice took charge again. "We've got to find out if Jones is around here. If he is, we don't know how much he knows. Tie up Weed, and tie him tight. If we can find Jones—fine. If we can't, we've got to make Smith talk. It's our only chance to find out where that money went. Yuh better tie up Connor, too; he's actin' like he wants to dive out a window."

"So you've got Smith?" remarked Filthy. "I can smell the deal now. You think Speedy got that money, eh? That's why you coyotes hit me on the head and took him out of jail."

"Tie him up," ordered the voice, "and gag the dumb fool. He talks too much."

Tombstone, sprawled on the roof, saw some of the action as they tied up both Connor and Filthy Weed. It was evident now that they had Speedy somewhere in the house. Connor pleaded with them to let him go back to Sunset Wells, but they laughed at him.

"No, yuh don't," one assured him. "You'd run out on us. Maybe you'd run

out with *all* the money. You ain't cleared yore own skirts, even if Hailstorm thinks your honest. Honest? That's a good'n. Havin' yore own bank robbed to cover your stealin'. Even if they git me, I can laugh at you, Connor."

"Nobody is laughin'—yet," assured the heavy voiced Hailstorm. "There—that'll hold Mr. Weed who came to find a posse. You won't need to gag Connor. He'll keep his mouth shut. Now, we'll get a few mesquite roots and start a fire in the fireplace."

"Ain't it hot enough?" asked one of the men.

"Not hot enough to put a white heat on a brandin' iron. This time Speedy Smith talks—and he'll talk plenty."

"Who goes out to get the wood?" asked one of the men.

"You will," said Hailstorm's voice. "Go and get it!"

Tombstone heard the kitchen door open and close. He wished he was over at that corner of the house, where he could fall on the wood gatherer. In a minute or two the man was back in the house with the wood, and they were building a fire. Smoke drifted from the old stone chimney.

CHAPTER VI

Out of a Job—Again

FOR ONCE in his life, Tombstone Jones didn't know what to do next. They were going to torture Speedy, that was evident. He could, even from the roof, interrupt such a proceeding, but could he terminate it? A few shots through the shakes might make things just a bit tough for him, and then he'd have a difficult time trying to fight it out with at least three men.

Then he heard Connor say; "You can't do that—it is plain savagery."

"Shut up!" snapped Hailstorm, "You may get it, too—remember that. If Smith can't or won't talk, maybe you will Connor. A dirty old crook like you wouldn't hesitate to doublecross us."

One of the men laughed and said, "Here's the runnin' iron we used on that Double S calf."

Tombstone saw sparks fly from the chimney, as the men inside shoved the iron deep into the blazing fire. Slowly he eased the shake away from its base on the roof, but it stuck and he was unable to enlarge the aperture very much. At least, he could shoot through it at anybody within the range of his vision.

One of the men said, "How about a drink? Maybe it'll take the stink of burnin' hide out of yore nose. How about it, Old Man?"

"One drink," growled Hailstorm. "We can't take chances on whiskey now. Get the bottle, Ira."

Speedy, crouched against the door, could hear most of the conversation, and realized that he was the object of their intentions. His hands and feet were free now, but his problem was to get out of the room, through the other room and open the door. There were at least three guns in that room, making his chances nil for a getaway. He didn't know what was in there, and he guessed that his door was locked or barred. As far as he was concerned, they would have to make the first move. Then he heard a voice say:

"All right, that iron is hot enough, boys. Bring him in."

Speedy slid back, stretched out on the floor where he had been so long, and pulled the blindfold over his eyes. He prayed that they would not bring a light and discover the loose ropes, which he had tossed into a far corner.

He heard them unbar the door and fling it open. The two men came in, and one stumbled against his knee. Speedy groaned and the man laughed harshly.

"Achin', eh?" he remarked, as he grasped Speedy's legs. "Well, you won't feel them aches when we git through with you."

The other man grabbed him by the shoulders. They swung him off the floor and carried him out quickly, dumping him near the fireplace. Speedy could see the

light now through his disarranged blindfold.

Tombstone, peering down through the roof, saw Speedy, as they dumped him on the floor. Realizing that he couldn't do a thing up there on the roof, he started to get his feet under him, intending to slide off the roof and try to make his attack from the ground floor, but his feet slipped and he came crashing down on his bony knees. That old roof was not built to withstand such an attack, and he felt himself going through the roof.

JUST a fraction of a second before that, Hailstorm yelled, "He's loose! No ropes—"

Then came the shower of broken shakes and splintering wood. Speedy jerked the blindfold aside and caught a glimpse of two long legs and the body of a man, dangling through the ceiling. His impression was that the man was in his sock feet, and some toes were showing. The next moment he twisted like a cat, came to his haunches and dived straight for the table, knocking it over and crashing the lamp to the floor.

It was all over in split seconds. One instant an amazed group of men, staring upward at dangling legs; the next instant nothing but darkness, a body hurtling down, more debris clattering.

A man crashed into the wall, yelling huskily, "Where's that door?"

Speedy had knocked the table almost into the fireplace, where it acted as a screen, cutting off what little light might have come from the flickering mesquite root fire. It seemed that every man in the room was waiting for someone else to make a move.

Then the querulous voice of Alvin Connor said, "Wh-wh-what happened?"

No one answered him. Then a man seemed to heave a deep sigh, and a quavering voice asked, "Who hit me? What's wrong? Who hit me?"

Whap! The sound of a blow was solid and distinct.

Speedy said, "Go ahead with yore silence. I've cooled off this heckler."

Wham! Flame lashed out from a six-shooter, and the bullet hit solidly into the wall three feet above Speedy's head. Speedy shot at the flash of the other gun and rolled aside quickly. Another shot flashed in Speedy's direction, but from a different direction, and the next moment a man yelped painfully, and his boots clattered on the floor.

Tombstone drawled, "Hit 'em on the shins, Speedy, they're susceptible."

"Why, you dirty coyote!" yelled a voice, and two swift shots blasted at where Tombstone's voice seemed to be.

But the lanky one, being very gun-wise, had shifted quickly. He shot once at the flashes, and a man fell against the table, his head and shoulders silhouetted against the flickering blaze in the fireplace.

No one spoke for a long time. Someone coughed in the acrid powder smoke, but stifled it quickly. It was a bad spot for jangled nerves, and one man couldn't stand it any longer. He rasped a bitter curse and lunged across the floor. There was a crash of broken glass, the thud of a falling body.

Speedy panted, "No, yuh don't, pardner! If anybody goes out this window, it'll be me—first!"

"Speedy!" called Tombstone.

"Yeah?" queried Speedy.

"I think we've done cleaned house."

"I welcome yore proclamation, feller. Now, if we can find a lamp."

Speedy lighted a match and found a lamp in the kitchen. The main room was quite a spectacle. Ira Wilson was flat on his back under a broken window, Slim Keene was sleeping peacefully in the middle of the room, while Hailstorm Wilson was partly draped over the upset table against the fireplace.

Alvin Connor, tightly roped, was humped up on a bench against the wall, and Filthy Weed was tied to a chair beside him. Filthy had been gagged with an old sock. Tombstone quicky untied Filthy and removed the ropes. After a few grimaces and a deep breath, the deputy demonstrated that his voice was not impaired.

"Such language!" Speedy said.

"They was goin' to murder me!" exclaimed Filthy.

"They were goin' to *fry* me," grinned Speedy.

From outside came the clatter of hoofs. Speedy went over and opened the door as men came up on the porch. Speedy stepped back to let three men in—Buck Shawn, Steve Parnell and, of all men—Jim Keaton, secretary of the association. They stood there, staring at the tableau for several moments.

"What on earth happened?" Buck asked at last.

"I'll tell yuh what happened!" exclaimed Filthy. "Hailstorm and his gang stole yore cows, Buck. He stole from the Box Eighty-eight too. He misbranded that calf and switched the hides. Speedy never got that bank money. It was a framed-up steal, framed up between Alvin Connor and Hailstorm Wilson. I dunno how Speedy got into it, but he never got the money. Tonight they tried to capture Tombstone Jones, but made a mistake and got Jud Holcomb. Jud saw 'em, and they thought they killed him."

"Lovely dove!" breathed Buck Shawn. "They—they wanted trouble between me and Ma Weston—so that's how it was! Filthy, I said you didn't have enough brains to come in out of the wet. I take it all back."

"You can keep it," said Filthy soberly. "I found this all out after they had me all tied up here."

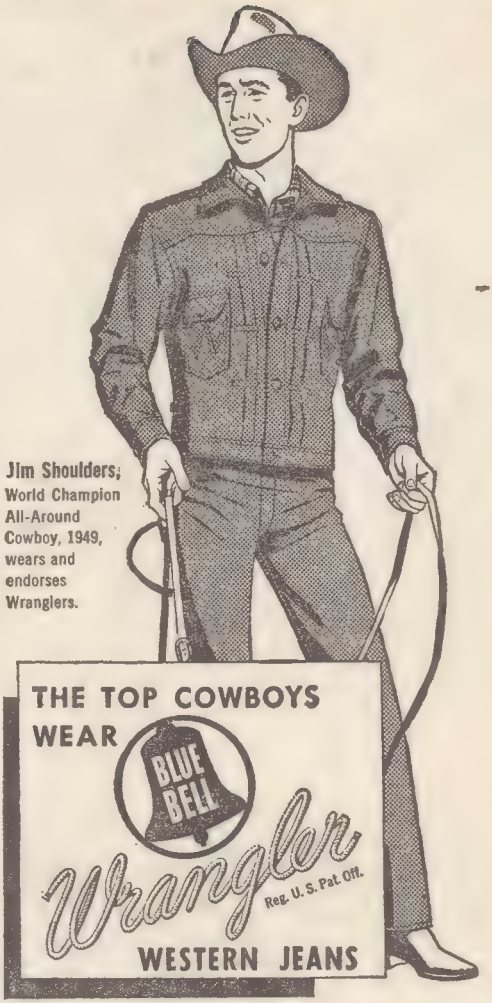
Jim Keaton looked up at the hole in the roof and asked, "What happened—an explosion?"

"That," replied Filthy soberly, "is where Sandy Claus came down. He—he missed the chimney."

"Where did you come from, Jim?" asked Tombstone.

"Well—" Jim Keaton smiled slowly—"I couldn't get any information from here, so I hopped a train and came down. I ran into Buck in Sunset Wells, and he said he and Parnell had decided to try and find Weed, who needed a posse to

[*Turn page*]



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catch Tombstone. He knew that Weed had started for the Circle Seven, so I came along."

"I resent that posse idea," declared Tombstone. "I never done anythin'."

"Looking around here," remarked Keaton, "I can hardly believe that statement."

"Filthy," said Buck Shawn, "you heard all this while they had yuh tied up, eh?"

"That's right, Buck. They didn't care what I knowed—I wasn't goin' to get out alive, anyway. Everythin' was all set. They had a hot iron in the fire, all ready to burn Speedy until he told what he done with the money. Then Tombstone came through the roof and Speedy knocked over the lamp."

"Team work," remarked Jim Keaton. "Your wrists look bad, Speedy. You must have had a time getting loose."

"It don't show much," remarked Tombstone, "but I figure that comin' through that roof I shore scraped the map of Texas on my hide. You can notice that I didn't have no room to spare. Speedy, stop feelin' sorry for me, and tell us where at is that money?"

SPEEDY grinned painfully, as he said slowly, "I didn't dare tell 'em—I mean the sheriff. I'd have gone to jail for the rest of my life. I dunno what made me do it, but when I banged into that feller behind the bank, and found myself with the sack of money, I threw it under the sidewalk."

"You mean—the money is safe?" gasped Buck Shawn.

"I have hopes," nodded Speedy soberly. "I've shore suffered a lot for money that won't never do me any good."

"Great jumpin' frogs, what news for Sunset Wells!" exclaimed Buck Shawn.

"Listen Shawn," said Tombstone soberly. "Remember me sayin' that you'd better find out who's been doin' yuh wrong? Remember me sayin' that after you got that all settled—if you still don't like me—we could kinda get together and settle things?"

"I remember every word of it, Jones," replied Buck soberly. "You said that if I still don't like yuh. Well, I'll tell yuh somethin', Jones—I don't just like yuh. After what's happened tonight, you can have anythin' I've got. Like yuh? I love every inch of yore skinny carcass."

"Yuh don't re-sent that punch in the jaw?"

"Go ahead and hit it again—I don't mind."

Tombstone looked around at them, shifted his eyes and looked up at the hole in the ceiling. Filthy said, "Looks like somebody fired a shotgun through the roof. Betcha he didn't knock off more'n four shingles."

Tombstone paid no attention to the insult to his avoirdupois, as he looked at Jim Keaton soberly and said, "Now that yuh're here, Jim, suppose you go out and ask Ma Weston what kinda jobs she's got for me and Speedy. Yuh see, we ain't had no time to contact her."

Jim Keaton looked soberly at Tombstone, as he said, "Yes, I'll do that, Tombstone. But her job was more or less of an emergency, and she may not need help now."

"Then you tell her for us that we're sorry. Maybe we can find a job some'ers else, Jim."

"I have a hunch that you will," grinned Keaton.

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

KINGPIN OF CUT-THROAT RIDGE

A Novelet of the Fighting West by JACKSON COLE

Galloway swaggered forward

PITCHFORK COUNTRY

By NOEL LOOMIS

Kill or be killed—If that's what Galloway wanted that's what he'd get!

THELMA came running gaily up the path from the creekbed. She held one arm behind her, and there was mischief in her eyes. She burst into the kitchen of their log cabin, where Kent

was casting lead balls for his ancient muzzle-loader. She stood on tiptoe and reached high for the blue china fruit-dish from Pennsylvania. Kent, with a ladle full of melted lead in his hand, looked up from the bullet-mold.

"What's the surprise this time?" he asked indulgently.

She set the dish before him in the center of their homemade log table and poured into it the contents of her hand. Then she stood back in the way that had endeared her to him, with the lights dancing in her warm brown eyes as she waited for his approval.

"I told you I could raise strawberries in Colorado," she said proudly.

Kent smiled fondly at her and then looked into the dish. He almost winced. It hurt him to see the three tiny, dry-weather, first-year berries in the bottom of the dish. They were bright red and glistening with the creek-water in which she had washed them, but they were pathetically under-sized. He looked and took a deep breath and smiled again at thought of the small things that pleased his wife. She seemed content with his affection, and asked but little that was material—which made her a double treasure in a pioneer country like the Territory of Colorado.

He poured the last bullet and set the ladle, with a small quantity of melted lead in the bottom, on the far end of the stove to cool. Then he turned to look down at her, as always breathing deeply at the sheen of her black hair, at the high red that came in her cheeks when she was excited.

"Some day," he promised softly, "I'll buy you a windmill, and you can raise all the strawberries you want."

She turned to dry her hands. "It would be all right down by the creek," she said, "if it didn't rise so much after every rain and wash them out. It's good soil. We could have a fine vegetable garden if we had a windmill. We probably could pay for it in a couple of years by selling green things in town."

He turned away. He took the ladle by its handle, turned it upside down and tapped it against the stove-top to knock out the small piece of solidified lead before he answered.

"It would take several hundred dollars for a mill and a good storage tank, and we can't spare that much cash."

She was pulling up a small leather-hinged opening in the floor. She reached down and brought up a tin syrup-bucket. She pried off the lid with a knife as she said, "Why not try to get one on credit in Lamar?"

He turned back from the window. His face was bronze and roughly chiseled, but his eyes were gentle and far-seeing. He hadn't wanted to alarm her, but neither did he want to conceal anything from her.

"I talked to Burns, the hardware man, but he doesn't like to give too much credit to us who have places near to Norvin Galloway. Lloyd Nelson, on the other side, was turned down too."

She said practically, "Did you ask at the bank?"

He shook his head. "Burns is wealthy and respected. Whatever he says, even the bank abides by. His opinion carries more weight in Lamar than the county judge."

She was dipping thick cream out of the bucket with a wooden spoon. She looked at him and asked seriously, "Why does Galloway make so much difference?"

"Galloway is known as a man of violence—a gunfighter and a troublemaker. If he and I got into a fight and I got killed," he said bluntly, "the hardware would have to repossess the windmill—and that is expensive."

She swallowed. Then she smothered the strawberries with the cream. "I heard," she said slowly, "that Galloway killed a man up in Montana over some rangeland."

He was momentarily startled that she knew that. "That's the talk," he admitted after a moment.

Thelma shuddered briefly. "Then," she said, loading sugar on top of the cream, "let's keep away from him," as if that

settled it.

"That's one reason I do not go around him," Kent said. "I hate killing. A man should not have to fear for his life even in Colorado. This has got to be pitchfork country—not gunfighting country."

"We'll manage," Thelma said. "Now—" she clapped her hands brightly—"sit down. We'll have a feast."

KENT enjoyed her pretenses; they gave a welcome light touch to a land that was still grim with the constant threat of Indians, outlaws, and violence. But he was sober when he sat at the table, for on the few occasions on which they had come in contact with Norvin Galloway, Kent had noted the bright gleam in Galloway's shiny black eyes whenever his glance fell on Thelma.

He had avoided Galloway whenever possible, but the man was always turning up. Also—and this was a thing he didn't tell his wife—Galloway had made no secret whatever of his admiration for Kent's four hundred acres. In fact, the bankers at Lamar had called this to Kent's attention and suggested that, coming from a man like Galloway, it tended to make an unstable situation.

Thelma held out a spoon with one strawberry encrusted with cream and sugar. He took it all in his mouth. She dipped out the second one for herself. "When I was down at the creek," she said, "I saw five antelope over on the ridge. Do you think they'll be there tomorrow? It's your day to hunt."

He was pressing the strawberry against the roof of his mouth with his tongue, savoring its excellent flavor. "It's strange," he said thoughtfully, "how much game we see south of the railroad tracks when it isn't my day to hunt. Galloway always seems to find more north of the tracks on his days than I do south on my days."

"You had first choice of territory when the railroad let the hunting contracts, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I took the south side because there's more cornland, and that ought to draw deer out of the hills, and antelope and turkeys." He turned rueful. "That was before the grasshoppers came in and took the corn."

"It's a shame you can't run into a buffalo herd. At five cents a pound it wouldn't take many buffalo to buy a windmill."

He shook his head. "It's 1874 and the buffalo are getting pretty well scattered."

She tried to give him the last strawberry, but he said, "Split it," and watched her playfully cut the last berry in two with the spoon.

"If you did find a herd," she said, "you wouldn't get but one unless they circled. You need a better gun, Kent, like the new one in the hardware store. It holds twelve shots, and you can buy cartridges already made."

She had half the berry and most of the thick cream on the spoon. He answered, trying to be casual, "My old muzzle-loader shoots straight. Anyway, I won't need it much longer. By the time the railroad gets to Las Animas, there won't be anything left in this country but quail and prairie chickens." He tried to dismiss it finally. He did not want her to know about the fever that had gone through him when he had held the Winchester .44 in his hands. "There's no market for anything like that out here—and anyway, you don't shoot birds with a rifle."

Her eyes, waiting for his to meet them, had the same look they had held when she had brought in the three berries. "I saw your face when you handled that rifle," she said softly. "You need that gun. I want you to have it. Every man likes a good rifle."

He took his bite. "Forget that," he ordered. "I'm more at home with a pitchfork in my hands. Anyway, we need cake for the cows this winter—now that the feed is gone." He sat back. "They're bringing in material to put up a restaurant in Lamar—Harvey House, they call it. I can get work on that when the railroad gangs pull out."

"You'd be away from home," she said. "And I'd be alone out here."

He wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. He had thought of that before, with Norvin Galloway less than a mile distant. Then he knew with a start that she was thinking the same thing, for she changed the subject. "With three cows fresh," she said, "it's a shame there's no place to sell butter."

HE WAS in the barn the next morning before the sky over Kansas was even gray. He forked out hay for the horses and milk cows, and it was then he noticed that one of the long, sharp tines of the pitchfork was broken. Thelma lowered her eyes in mock penitence. "I was moving some strawberries closer to the creek," she said, "and broke it on a stone. I guess I pushed too hard. It was a big stone."

He looked at her across the top of the lantern and laughed. "I'll get another fork in town," he said.

He saddled the roan, and Thelma helped him hitch the bay team to the light wagon. He loaded the skidding-boards in the wagon, mounted the saddle-horse, and led out. Thelma closed the corral gate behind the wagon. "Lots of luck," she said with a little wave.

"Thanks."

Thelma often went with him to drive the wagon, but the new calf was still pretty wobbly, and coyotes were a constant menace. Anyway, the team led well and stood well. He jerked on the rope tied to the lead horse's bridle, and they rolled up the creek behind him. The creek ran in a deep ravine washed out by rain—not by the creek itself, which was very small until it joined the Two Butte, which flowed into the Arkansas River near the state line. He topped a rise and looked back. It was just turning light, and Thelma was still standing by the corral-gate. He waved and went on.

Half a mile west he was startled by the roar of a huge covey of quail that got up at his horse's feet. There must have been four or five hundred birds, he thought. Quail and prairie chickens were abundant, and sagehens up in the hills. But the railroad cooks didn't want birds; they were too hard to clean.

He crossed the creek and headed for the ridge where Thelma had seen the antelope. At sunup he was scanning the ridge from behind a clump of beargrass, with the wind in his face. There was, as he had feared, no sign of the pronghorns. He was about to get to his feet when he saw something move in a small clump of tall mesquite near the bottom of the ridge. He caught his breath and got back down. Buffalo! He recognized the big humps and the small hind quarters. There were a bull and three cows—the last of a herd that had been slaughtered for hides.

He didn't want the animals to run down the slope, for that would bring them out in Norvin Galloway's place, so he did not approach from where he was. He couldn't get within gunshot from upwind, so he made a circle on the far side of the ridge, and came down on them from the top where he could shoot downslope. He was on foot, his horse below him. He rested the musket on a rock and took long aim, allowing for the wind from his right, and holding low to avoid overshooting. He aimed at the bull. He wouldn't be the best eating but he carried the most meat. If Kent had had a repeating rifle he would have shot a cow and then he could have got a couple more while they were milling. With the bull down, the cows would not mill but scatter, but that didn't matter, because it took too long to reload the .58 anyway. Buffalo had been plenty spooky the last couple of years. He held his breath and pulled the trigger.

The minie ball whistled downhill. He heard it hit. The bull started off to the left at a run, and Kent watched, holding his breath. The bull went a hundred yards and suddenly collapsed. The cows trotted a few feet upwind, then turned and went back toward the bull. They slowed, hesitated, then one broke into a run toward the head of the draw where Kent's wagon was hidden. The others followed. A moment later, while Kent was still loading his gun, they streamed out of the draw and went north.

Kent went back for the wagon. He tied

the saddle horse to the tailboard and drove down the slope on the opposite side from the ridge, through the mesquite. The bull was a big one and Kent was exultant. He thought it might go fourteen hundred pounds. At construction crew prices it was worth a lot of money.

He made a slide with the skidding-boards, blocked the wagon-wheels with rocks, and used the three horses to pull the carcass into the wagon. It made a good load, and he started off northwest toward Lamar. He would hit his own farm road within a mile.

BUT after he got on the road he saw where the buffalo cows had crossed, and began to speculate. Even one more was worth hunting for, and there was always the chance— He left the team loose; they would stay on the road.

It was less than three miles to the Santa Fe tracks that divided his hunting territory from Galloway's. He didn't see the cows, but he followed their trail to the point where it crossed the steel. He jumped fifteen or twenty prairie chickens when he rode up to the tracks. Then he sat his horse and looked over the country to the north.

His pulse pounded. He saw the three cows walking over a ridge against the skyline. They were tired and had slowed down. There was a small creek below the ridge and they would stop down there to browse.

Kent looked both ways along the track. There was no one in sight. He looked back at the hill over which the cows had gone. It was Galloway's territory but it wasn't Galloway's day to hunt. There weren't any farms within several miles. He could slip over there and get at least one of the cows. With the bull it would be worth a hundred dollars. That was a good start on a windmill.

He remembered the way Galloway looked at Thelma and he knew that Galloway would welcome an excuse for trouble, but then he remembered the excitement in Thelma's eyes over the strawberries. He touched his horse in the flank and went across the track.

He had no trouble spotting the cows. He got within range and fired. One animal went down. The others milled and then ran. He was so elated that he didn't stop to reload his gun. He swung into the saddle and galloped down to the creek. Now he would have to get the carcass to the wagon.

But he was spared that problem. He came to the carcass and dismounted. It was a nice one. The best way was to butcher it and pack the meat out on his saddle-horse—but that would take a lot of time.

It was then he heard Galloway's grating voice: "Looks like you got some meat."

He looked up. Galloway had risen from a clump of mesquite. He was a tall man, hawk nosed and ferret eyed. He swaggered as he walked forward, as if he relished the situation. His big .44 slapped against his thigh, but for the moment, that wasn't as bad for Kent as his embarrassment. Kent's face turned hot and he wished—well, there was no point in wishing anything. He should have used better judgment. He said hopefully, "I jumped them on the south side."

Galloway smiled acidulously. "Looks like you killed this one on my side," he said. His right hand hung loose, near his pistol. "What do you aim to do?" he said.

Kent swallowed. There was nothing he could do. He knew what Galloway expected and wanted—a gunfight—and for a moment Kent, watching his hawk nose and his beady eyes, wished he did have a rifle with more than one shot. He thought he would have fought it out, for he knew that as long as Galloway was in the country they would fear him. But his rifle was empty and the impulse passed. Besides, he was in the wrong.

He said with difficulty, "I guess it belongs to you under the contract." He wondered if Galloway had heard him shoot the bull and then had ridden across and waited for him. But there was no excuse for Kent at all. Galloway had a right to kill game on the north side whenever he wanted, although the railroad

bought meat from them each on alternate days.

Galloway looked at him sardonically. His gun hand went limp. "You better go home," he said. "This ain't no country for farmers."

Kent straightened. Galloway's manner was insulting, but Galloway still had the only loaded gun. Knots formed at the corners of Kent's jaw. He glared back at Galloway. Then he turned slowly and picked up his reins. He mounted and swung the horse.

Galloway said, "Wait a minute."

Kent reined in and looked back. Galloway was grinning at him, but Galloway's voice was harsh when he said, "Next time I catch you on my side I won't be so easy. I'll shoot first and talk afterwards."

Kent did not answer. He had been humiliated enough. He rode on out of the little valley, glad to reach a point where his back would not present a target to Galloway.

He found the team and drove slowly into town. The railroad foreman was a big red-faced man. He took a look at the bull and said, "He's tough but he's meat. It's about time you brought in something worth while. I was just about to turn your territory over to somebody else."

Kent stiffened. "What do you mean by that?"

"Your contract calls for three hundred pounds of meat every other day. You haven't been making it."

"Game is scarce," said Kent.

"Galloway doesn't have any trouble," the foreman said. "I figure you aren't hunting very hard. We've got nearly six hundred men building this railroad, and they holler if they don't get meat."

Kent felt low. Even the gold he got for the buffalo didn't make him feel much better. He stopped by the hardware store to look at the Winchester. He felt reckless and almost bought the gun. Then he remembered that if he had had it a few hours before, either he or Galloway would be dead now. He passed it up. The money would still make a good start on a windmill.

IT WAS late when he got home, and Thelma was waiting for him by the side of the road a quarter of a mile from the house. She climbed up on the spring seat and huddled close to him.

"What are you doing out here in the dark?" he asked.

"The dun cow lost herself this afternoon," said Thelma. "I was looking for her calf."

Kent touched her hand. Something gave him a premonition. "What was it?" he insisted.

He went cold when she answered, "Norvin Galloway came this afternoon and stayed a long time. I couldn't get rid of him, and I was scared." For the first time he heard a suppressed sob.

His arm tightened around her. "And you've been out here alone ever since," he said grimly.

Her head nodded against his chest. "I was waiting for you," she said.

Kent slept little that night. He knew that Thelma's uneasiness was well grounded, and it began to seem like an intolerable situation. He thought of buying out Galloway, but he knew Galloway wouldn't sell. Galloway was the bully of twenty sections and he enjoyed it too much to sell his land.

He thought of selling his own land, but he knew that no person would buy next to Galloway unless it was a steal. He thought of the law, but he had no protection because he had no legal complaint. Galloway had done nothing. He was a menace because of his reputation and his implied threats and the things a man knew he would do if he got the chance—but you couldn't carry that to the courts.

Kent's throat was dry and tight when he got up the next morning. The only way to security, it seemed, was to fight Galloway and whip him. Kent wasn't afraid of a fight, but he didn't like gunfighting—and that was the way Galloway ended everything.

Kent touched Thelma and awoke her. "We'll drive into town today," he said, "and see about work on the Harvey House. Maybe I can get a place where

we can both stay until that is built."

She was yawning and stretching. "Who would take care of the stock?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said glumly. "Come on, let's feed up and go to town anyway. We can figure out something. Maybe I could ride out every evening and take care of the milking and all."

They had breakfast and went into town in the light wagon. Thelma needed flour, and Kent thought he would get the first load of cake for winter.

He went to the site of the Harvey House and found them piling up red bricks on the ground from a dray-wagon. He found the foreman, a tall, gaunt man wearing a square black hat, a buttoned-up vest, and no tie.

The foreman squinted down the track to the east and said, "We're bringing in lumber and cement from Indiana, and as soon as the form-lumber gets here I can use a dozen good men on picks. It'll be hard work—ten hours a day, and from the looks of it, this ground is like iron and you'll be ready to eat your supper when you get through, but from the looks of you," he said shrewdly, "you're tall and strong enough, I reckon."

He wrote Kent's name in a small notebook that he kept in one of the pockets of his soiled vest. "Keep in touch with me," he said. "It'll be a couple of weeks, maybe."

Kent said, "Fine." The railroad construction crews would be in Las Animas by that time, and Kent's contract to supply meat would be cancelled.

He and Thelma went to look for a room, but here they were not fortunate. Everything in the hotel was reserved by railroad men, Harvey House officials, and cattle buyers. They tried to get a private room, but the town was new and there were no rooms available. By midafternoon they were tired and discouraged. Kent had an offer to allow him to sleep on the floor of the hotel lobby for twenty-five cents a night, and that was all.

Thelma, avoiding his eyes, said, "I'd better stay on the place, I guess, Kent."

Kent looked at her and saw the trouble in the brown eyes. He drew a long breath. "Maybe something will turn up," he said without hope.

HE LEFT Thelma at the store with her grocery list, while he started for the feed store for the cake. Then he remembered that he needed a pitchfork, and he stopped at the hardware store and tied his team to the hitching-post in the back.

He walked into the store, through a room the rafters of which were loaded with black iron horseshoes and mule-shoes. He ducked under a low door and went between bins of square nails and a rack covered with yellow horse-collars. He came out into the open space at the front of the store and spoke to Burns, the hardware man.

Lloyd Nelson was sitting on the counter, swinging his legs. "Howdy," said Kent.

But Nelson's greeting was strange. "Yeah," he said.

Kent said to Burns, "I want a pitchfork."

"Hangin' on the wall there behind you," said the hardware man. "Take your pick."

Nelson said abruptly, "I hear you was huntin' on Norvin Galloway's side of the tracks."

Kent's lips parted. He said, "You've got big ears," and closed his lips.

"Galloway claims you showed yellow," Nelson insisted. "He's been telling how he's going to run you out of the country so he can have your land."

"Galloway talks too much," said Kent tightly.

"He says you killed a buffalo on his side and he offered to fight you for it, but you backed down."

"I was wrong," Kent said, "in going on his side." He was beginning to sweat profusely. Nelson's persistence was a bad omen. It meant that all of the neighbors knew Galloway's version of the buffalo incident and had lost respect for Kent because he had backed down.

Nelson said sarcastically, "I suppose you don't know that Galloway rides through the south territory every morn-

ing and flushes most of the game across the tracks to his side, and I suppose you didn't shoot that cow on his side to get even, did you?"

Kent stared at Nelson. It was a shock, but he knew it must be true. He looked at the older hardware man and saw disapproval — disapproval and contempt. They thought he knew about Galloway's scaring the game but had been afraid to face him. Nelson went on. "Do you think Galloway would throw down on you if you didn't have a gun?"

"Yes," said Kent. "Don't you?"

"Who says I'd pull iron on a man who wasn't heeled?" roared a grating voice.

Kent spun on his heel. The hawk-nosed Galloway was standing in the door, his usual six-shooter on his thigh, his ferret eyes going over Kent. Kent said nothing, but he began to tighten up.

Galloway swaggered up to Kent. "You're a piker," he said. "You're yellow. You won't fight." He slapped Kent's face.

For an instant Kent saw red. He started to raise his arms, but he saw Galloway's hand dropping toward his gun. Kent controlled himself. His jaws were tight.

Galloway smiled cynically. "I'll run you out of Colorado Territory," he said, with thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "And you'll go so fast you'll leave your wife behind."

Kent's head went rigid. His voice was taut when he said, "What do you mean?"

Galloway either did not get the danger signal or else he had wanted it. He seemed intent on humiliating Kent. He smiled caustically and said, "Where you going to leave her when you go to work on the Harvey House?"

KENT HIT him. There was no excuse for a man like Galloway using Thelma's name before other men. Kent hit him with all the power of his long arms and work-hardened muscles. Then he stood with legs wide, waiting while Galloway staggered back.

Galloway found his feet. He stood up. His ferret eyes were blazing. His face was white with indignation, and astonishment was plain in his eyes.

For a moment Kent felt his new-found power. He said, "You didn't think I'd fight, did you?"

Then he was ashamed of having said it, for it was bravado, and there was need now of a deadly defense. Galloway was coming toward him. Galloway's eyes were bulging with hatred above his hawk nose. When Kent taunted him, he rushed at Kent. His boots made sharp noises on the wooden floor.

Kent stood his ground. He met Galloway with hard blows in the man's face and drove him back. Lloyd Nelson still sat on the counter, watching with sharp eyes. He had quit swinging his legs. Burns behind the counter had moved back against the wall.

Kent took that in from a corner of his eye. Then he concentrated on Galloway. He saw the wildness in the man's eyes, and he knew now that nothing short of disabling injuries would stop Galloway. It frightened Kent, and suddenly he had no stomach for the fight. He didn't mind a fight, but he had no wish to fight a crazy man, where a man had to kill or be killed.

But he had no choice. Galloway came in. Kent got set. Galloway kicked him on the thigh. It was hard and it seemed to make his thigh muscles draw up into a knot. He tried to step on that foot as he backed away, but his leg gave. He saved himself from going down by grasping the horse-collar rack.

Galloway was onto him, striking blindly and furiously. Fists raked Kent's skin; they hammered his nose and eyes as he hung there. He took the punishment for a moment. Then the battering in his face seemed to nullify the pain in his leg. He stood up and swung back. He drove Galloway to the center of the room.

Galloway backed still further, until he came up against the front wall. The fury in his eyes was obscene. To Kent it was like standing under an unbearably harsh light. He shook his head and blinked his eyes.

Galloway was coming at him. Galloway's head was low. He bent over and

launched himself at Kent. His head struck Kent in the pit of his stomach and knocked him backward across the room. Kent fell against the wall in a jumble of pitchfork handles. He was gasping. His insides felt as if they were all stuck together. He slid to the floor in a sitting position, and a heavy pitchfork dropped from its pegs on the wall and fell fork down into the floor. One of the needle-point tines went through the cloth of Kent's trouser-leg, and the fork stood upright, with the outer tine singing clear of the floor.

GALLOWAY was wholly wild. He crouched. He whispered gratingly, "Hunt in my territory, will you!" His six-shooter came into his hand and he aimed it at Kent.

Rage went through Kent like a flood. He surged to his feet. He snatched the pitchfork from the floor and held it head high and charged. He took a grazing shot on the ribs, and then another so close it set his clothes on fire, but the bullet missed, for not even Galloway could look a pitchfork in the face and shoot straight.

Kent did not miss. Galloway took one step back. Then Kent nailed him to the wall with a pitchfork tine through the center of his neck.

Galloway died there with a smoking pistol in his hand. His body slumped and when it fell it pulled the pitchfork loose from the wall.

Kent looked at the man's body and felt abruptly sick. He beat the fire out of his shirt and stalked out through the front door to find the sheriff. There was no telling how Lloyd Nelson would remember that fight or what he would say to the sheriff, and Kent didn't want to be accused of running away.

The sheriff wasn't in. Kent waited a while. His discouragement was like a numbness. He had ruined everything. If he should be held for murder they would lose the farm.

After a while he got up and went out. Then he heard Thelma's voice: "Kent! I've been looking for you!"

She took him into her arms, cooing as she would have to a baby. They started walking. Kent said stonily, "I killed Galloway. I've got to find the sheriff." He kept repeating that.

They went down the alley and got into their wagon. It was then Kent saw the strange boxes in the wagon—one that was six or seven feet square and a foot thick, and some others—plus some four-by-four timbers. He sat down in the seat and looked again. Then he looked at Thelma.

"Mr. Burns said you wanted a windmill, and he wanted to be the one to sell it to you," Thelma said, watching him.

He opened his mouth and closed it. Burns was selling him a windmill on credit—after seeing the fight. That practically meant Kent was free. They would not even try him if the hardware man felt that way.

But Kent was sober. "It doesn't do us much good," he said. "There's still a hard winter to get through—and no green feed."

Thelma said eagerly, "Kent, the Harvey House people have posted a notice in the grocery store. They want somebody to contract to furnish game for their meals. Seventy-five cents a dozen for quail, a dollar and a half a dozen for prairie chickens. And they will pay ten cents a pound for butter. Oh, Kent!" She was bubbling with enthusiasm. "Everything is going to be all right. You've been supplying meat to the railroad—you can get that Harvey House contract!"

He looked at her and for the first time that day he really saw the warmth in her brown eyes. He smiled broadly. Then he untied the reins from the buggy-whip socket. "Git up," he said. "We got to get busy if we want strawberries next summer."

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Next Issue: GUNS OF FORT PERILOUS, an Indian-Fighting Novelet by SAMUEL MINES—and many other exciting yarns!

No PEACE for a PRODIGAL

by Leslie Ernenwein

Fighting Bill Quantrell loses his friends and makes new foes when he tries to halt range war in Palomitas Basin!

BILL QUANTRELL rode into Rincon at noon looking as lean as one of his own Anchor steers. His flat-crowned hat was sweat-stained, there were patches in both sleeves of his faded shirt and the the sorrel bronc he rode looked saddle beat.

Leisurely, Quantrell passed the Acme Hotel where Banker Sam Bafferton stood with Sue Hildegarde on the veranda. They made an exceptionally handsome pair, but Bill Quantrell took no pleasure in seeing them together. Remembering that he'd once had hopes of marrying Jeb Hildegarde's black-haired daughter, Quantrell's lips twisted into a cynical smile. That had been before the Palomitas Pool accused old Bronc Bronson of being a rustler; before there'd been any need for fight talk.

Sue Hildegarde glanced up and smiled a wordless greeting as Quantrell passed the hotel. But Sam Bafferton didn't smile.

"You're late," the young banker called. "They're waiting for you upstairs. Shake a leg!"

"So?" Quantrell mused, and riding on at the same slow jog, watched the Tucson

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There was a blast of guns from the oncoming riders

stage rock to a stop before the Wells Fargo office. Four gun-hung men got out. When the driver tossed down their warbags they tromped off toward the Palace Saloon. But as Bill Quantrell turned in at Modeen's Livery, his mind was on other things.

Little Mike Modeen said, "Ye better git a wiggle on ye, lad. The Pool vote is deadlocked, three to three."

"Then that's why they waited," Quantrell reflected, and took time to slap dust from his shoulders. "Six members split even, and I'm Number Seven. Which makes the sorriest little old outfit in the Palomitas Pool plenty important today."

"Old Jed Hildegarde has augered hisself black in the face tryin' to talk 'em into votin' fight," the liveryman reported. "Jeb wants the Pool to ride up into the Rampage Hills and smash Bronson's outfit to smithereens. But thim three peace-lovers won't budge, bejasus!"

Quantrell grinned, and from a thorough knowledge of the Pool membership, said, "The peace-lovers would we Swane, Ledbetter and Bawtry."

"That's thim," the Irishman agreed.

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Then he asked: "How ye votin', Bill?"

"How the hell would you expect me to vote?" Quantrell demanded.

"Well," Mike said shrewdly, "'twould be yer natural inclination to vote fight, bein' as how ye have a strain of wild Irish blood. But ye got yer start in this country bustin' broncs for Bronson and ye might not be believin' he's up to all the deviltriment that's been laid to him."

WHICH WAS, Quantrell reflected, partly why he'd deliberately prolonged the ride from his little Anchor outfit in the hills, hoping the vote would be over and done with by the time he reached Rincon.

"But thin there's Sue Hildegarde," Modeen continued slyly. "She wouldn't like ye sidin' agin her dad, and she's cute as a bug's ear."

Which was another part of the reason Billy Quantrell had ridden slow and thoughtful, an important part.

Sue and Bafferton were still on the veranda when Bill Quantrell went up the hotel steps. The brown-haired banker said: "Your vote will save the Pool from disgracing itself, Bill—if you vote like you should."

"Such as how?" Quantrell asked, feeling a familiar surge of resentment against this slick-talking town dude who'd tried to replace him in Sue's affections.

"Fight, of course," Bafferton declared, squaring his broad shoulders. "To rid this range of that renegade's roost in the Rampage Hills, once and for all!"

Quantrell eyed the banker appraisingly, contemplating Bafferton's white shirt and fawn-colored pants and unscuffed, bench-made boots. Bafferton had been a forty-dollar-a-month cowpuncher up north until he'd inherited the Rincon Bank from his uncle. About the only riding he'd done since then had been to call on Sue Hildegarde at Circle H.

"I'll vote as I please," Quantrell drawled, and was strongly aware of Sue's questioning eyes.

When he started to go into the hotel she plucked at his sleeve and said urgently: "I know you used to be friendly with Bronson, but don't be foolish, Bill. Don't vote against Dad."

For a fleeting moment, with this girl's blue eyes wistfully pleading and the sense of her nearness affecting him as it always did, Bill Quantrell felt indecision hammer at him. He recalled the last time they'd ridden in the moonlight together; how he'd tried to find words to tell her why he was working and saving his money. But the words wouldn't come, so he had kissed her instead. And she'd seemed to understand.

Bill Quantrell said, "I suppose you'd be plenty put out if I sided against your dad."

"I'd despise any man who didn't have the courage to fight for the right, no matter what it cost him," she said slowly, as if seeking the answer in her own mind. "I—I guess I'd hate you, Bill."

Whereupon he turned into the hotel lobby, climbed the stairs and stepped into the Pool's meeting room.

Tobacco smoke made flimsy streamers here, and the sense of tension was like a tangible pressure as the six men glanced at Bill Quantrell.

He put his fingers to shaping a cigarette and glanced thoughtfully at these men. With the exception of Bart Pelky, whose Pitchfork spread was the largest outfit in Palomitas Basin, they'd all been friendly enough in the past. Now they eyed him in the calculating fashion of strangers who were waiting for him to identify himself.

Sid Swane said, "Jeb, Tate and Bart have voted to run Bronson out. Me and Ike and Jim voted to sit tight and wait for the sheriff to get the deadwood on Bronson."

"Sheriff, hell!" Bart Pelky scoffed, a scowl rutting his dark, predatory face. "We've sent for the badge-toter before, and what good did it do? By the time he gets here the trail is too old to follow and he finds no evidence!"

"Bronson ain't stealing the sheriff's cattle," Jeb Hildegarde declared stubbornly. "He's stealing from the Pool and the Pool has got to stop him!"

Bill Quantrell had no gift of easy speech.

And he knew how useless talk would be here now. But he made a try, regardless. "I haven't seen Bronc for quite a spell," he said, "but I'm willing to bet my Anchor outfit against a plugged peso that Bronc isn't rustling Pool cattle."

"Who the hell is then?" Tate Vedder demanded. "Who busted through Jeb's fence last night and run off twenty head of his best beef?"

That news surprised Quantrell, for he hadn't known there'd been so recent a raid. Yet, because he owed a debt of loyalty to Bronson, he said stubbornly: "Bronc may sell horses to noose-dodging renegades now and then, and maybe he's not too particular who sleeps in his bunkhouse. But Bronc is no cow thief. I'd bet my life on that."

"Mebbe you'll git that chance—if you side him," Vedder warned.

Jeb Hildegarde said, frowning, "Don't talk like that, Tate. Bill ain't figgering to side rustlers. He's just thinking things out, like he's got a right to do."

"Shouldn't take much thought," Bart Pelky announced. "What the hell you got to lose, Quantrell? Your two-bit outfit don't amount to much, and you've got no kids or a wife to worry about. How you votin'?"

A SENSE of apprehension slogged through Quantrell as he met Pelky's domineering gaze. Here, he reflected, was a man deliberately attempting to prod peaceful, God-fearing men into a holocaust of hate that would bring red ruin to Palomitas Basin. Yet even then, Quantrell had no inkling of how completely the cards were stacked against him. He thought his vote would save needless bloodshed; that he could keep the Pool from waging war on Bronson. And because he understood thoroughly what that vote would cost him, how surely it would banish every chance he'd ever had of winning Sue for a wife, he hesitated another long moment.

Until Jeb Hildegarde asked, "How about it, Bill? You voting with me?"

Quantrell heard footsteps in the doorway behind him, and glancing around, saw Sam Bafferton step into the room. Then he turned to Hildegarde and said quietly, "No, Jeb, I'm voting against you."

Surprise widened the old cowman's faded eyes. "You—you mean you're for Bronson?" he asked in the faltering tone of a man not sure of his senses. "That you'd side him in a fight agin members of your own pool?"

"There won't be any fight," Quantrell pointed out, and got to his feet. "The vote is four to three."

But Bart Pelky loosed a hoot of jeering laughter. He stepped around the table and put a boot in the chair Quantrell had vacated. Something about that boot in the chair attracted Quantrell's attention.

"Who says there won't be no fight?" Pelky demanded.

Quantrell shrugged, still endeavoring to identify the reason this man's boot had attracted his interest. It wasn't new or shiny; in fact, it was scuffed by long service and caked with dried mud.

"The vote," Quantrell said, meeting Pelky's arrogant stare, "means the Pool won't ride against Bronson."

"All that means," Pelky declared, "is that the Palomitas Pool is busted, voted out of business by a bunch of Gentle Annies that ain't got guts enough to guard their own range. It means that Jeb and Tate and me will fight Bronson without the help of yellow-streak galoots like you!"

That sneering accusation brought a ruddy flush to Bill Quantrell's lean face. For a fleeting instant he tried to control the high tide of his rage, tried to tell himself that Pelky was taunting him into a fight. But even as that thought flashed through his mind, Quantrell drew his right hand back, cocking it to swing at Pelky's face.

"Don't call me yellow!" he snapped.

At this same instant, Quantrell saw Pelky grab for his gun. The astonishment of that stopped Quantrell in his tracks. It didn't occur to him that Pelky might have misinterpreted the movement of his right hand, might have thought it was starting

toward a holster. In this fragment of flicking time he knew only that he had to beat that draw.

Bill Quantrell drew and fired with a fluid smoothness that made the motion seem deliberate, almost slow. Yet the blast of his gun filled the hotel room with trapped sound a split second before Pelky's gun cleared leather.

The Pitchfork boss teetered back on his heels with a yelp of pain. His gun slipped from splayed fingers and for a hushed interval, while he stared stupidly at the blood trickling down from his right shoulder, no one moved and no one spoke.

Then Sam Bafferton exclaimed: "No wonder Quantrell is siding Bronson! He's Bronc's same breed of outlaw!"

Quantrell sheathed his gun. He wheeled, faced Bafferton and demanded savagely: "You want in on this deal?"

"I'm unarmed," Bafferton objected. "And I'm no gunslick."

"But you aren't any cripple either," Quantrell growled. "You've got two hands—which is all a man needs to fight with!"

Jeb Hildegarde stepped quickly between them. "You've had your vote, Quantrell, now git out!"

Bill Quantrell knew then that instead of stopping a threatened range war he had fanned the smoldering embers into flame. A dismal sense of regret ran through him as he heard Sue's startled voice demand from the doorway:

"What happened? I heard a shot!"

"Quantrell tried to kill Bart and broke his arm instead," Bafferton told her.

At that Quantrell's resentment turned into a turmoil of hot fury that boiled in his veins like liquid fire. Pushing Jeb Hildegarde aside, he lunged at Bafferton and snarled: "Fight, you lying son! Fight!" and hit the big banker in the face.

THAT short, snapping blow transformed Sam Bafferton completely. All the smooth blandness faded from his features instantly, and a savage scowl rutted his broad face. His huge body, which had appeared soft in its stylish attire, tensed into crouching litheness and there was a malletlike power in the blows he slammed at Quantrell.

Narrowly dodging Bafferton's two-fisted attack, Quantrell hit the banker's jaw with a lancing right, blocked the barrage of blows that instantly followed, and tried to target Bafferton's face again. But the banker was as fast as a cat crossing a hot griddle, his huge body weaving in the fashion of an accomplished fighter. Which was when Bill Quantrell understood that for the second time this day he had been deliberately taunted into trouble.

Tate Vedder called, "Pour it on 'im, Sam!"

Just then, as Quantrell smashed a left to Bafferton's midriff, he felt the crushing impact of the banker's knuckles on his forehead. Blood ran down into his left eye, blinding it. When he hunched up his shoulder to wipe the blood away, Bafferton hit him on the right temple with a glancing blow that barely grazed the flesh. Yet almost at once another trickle of blood ran down his forehead, finding its way into his right eye.

Puzzlement nagged at Quantrell's mind as he dodged and circled. When Bafferton charged in at close quarters, Quantrell went into a clinch, using this respite to wipe his bloody forehead on the banker's shoulder.

"I'm going to stomp your guts into the floor!" Bafferton bragged, pushing Quantrell away.

Quantrell glimpsed a glint of gold on one of the banker's fingers, and understood why blood was blinding his eyes. Sam Bafferton wore a claw-set ring and was using it with crafty skill!

Knowing that it would be but a matter of time until Bafferton cut his face to ribbons with that ring, Quantrell charged the big man with reckless abandon. The swiftness of his attack caught Bafferton with his guard carelessly down, so that Quantrell's slugging fists landed solidly. The feel of the banker's flesh against his knuckles whipped up a savage satisfaction in Quantrell, and the gusty groan loosed by bloody lips was music to Bill's ears.

Urgently, as a man battling against time, Quantrell battered Bafferton's blocking arms aside. He slugged the backtracking banker in the stomach, the vicious blow bringing a grunted groan from Bafferton's bloody lips. Then his guard came down, and Quantrell hit him flush in the face with both fists.

"Clinch!" Bart Pelky yelled.

Bafferton tried to follow the instruction. He caught the lean rider around the shoulders and endeavored to rest his weight against Quantrell and gain the time he needed. But Quantrell fought free of those grappling arms, smashed rights and lefts to Bafferton's head while the big banker swayed drunkenly with the impact of each blow and Sue Hildegarde cried:

"He's killing him!"

Brutally, with a savage grin slanting across his ring-slashed face, Quantrell battered Bafferton again and again, until the big man tipped over backward and sprawed full lentgh on the floor.

Quantrell brushed a sweat-stained sleeve across his forehead, and seeing that Bafferton's eyes were open, snarled: "Get up and fight, you smart-alecky son!"

But the banker didn't seem to hear him. He lay unmoving, a vacant stare in his eyes. Quantrell glanced at Sue who stood in the doorway, her eyes dark against the pallor of her oval face.

All the savage exultation went out of Quantrell then and he said soberly: "It wasn't a nice thing for you to watch, Sue. I'm sorry you had to see it."

She hurried over to Bafferton and, kneeling beside him, used her handkerchief to wipe his battered, bloody face. Then she looked at Quantrell and there was a plain note of revulsion in her voice when she said, "You brute!"

"It'll be open season on brutes from now on!" Bart Pelky declared, tightly grasping his wounded right arm.

Which was when Quantrell inquired, "Had rain up your way lately?"

"No!" the Pitchfork boss barked. "But you'll have a rain of lead, soon as this arm heals!"

JEB HILDEGARDE stepped scowlingly between them, said bluntly: "You've done enough damage for one day, Quantrell. Get out!"

Presently, just before he rode from Modeen's stable, Quantrell asked another question. "You hear of any rain over Circle H way?"

"Yeah," the little liveryman told him. "Jeb said they had a heavy shower last night, which same washed out them rustler's tracks so's they couldn't be trailed."

Quantrell was thinking about that while he traveled westward, following a crooked road that climbed into the Rampage Hills. It might not mean a thing, yet because his mind was grasping for any straw that would stave off the calamity of range war, no clue was too trivial for consideration.

That frugal hope was still in him when Quantrell approached his homestead shortly before sundown. A brown and white dog stood in front of the door, its hackles raised until it scented Quantrell. Then the dog barked joyously and ran to meet him.

"Howdy, Pal," Quantrell greeted, as if he were addressing a person. "Everything all right?"

Pal wagged his tail so furiously that his whole body wagged with it. He made sounds that were half bark, half whine, which was his way of voicing happiness. When Quantrell dismounted at the corral and petted him, Pal licked Bill's hand and presently, as Quantrell went to the shack and started a fire in the stove, Pal flopped down in his favorite corner with a contented sigh.

"Looks like it's going to be just you and me, kid—all the way," Quantrell reflected, talking to Pal, as was his custom.

Pal thumped the floor with his tail, soulful eyes watching Quantrell constantly. He'd been a skinny little tramp skulking around alleys in Rincon when Bill adopted him. "Just a freckle-bellied pup that nobody wants," Bill had said at the time, and toted him home, never dreaming how close a companionship would develop between them. A man got plenty lonesome, batching up here in the hills and

not seeing anyone for weeks at a time. Pal—hell, he could do everything but talk, and he even made a try at that. A man wasn't really alone with a dog around!

The last banners of sunset were painting the high hills with harlequin hues as Bill Quantrell rode a fresh bronc from the Anchor yard. He called: "Keep the pack-rats out of the house, Pal boy," and grinned at the knowing way Pal wagged his tail.

Bronc Bronson had befriended him at a time when he needed help. Now he had to return the favor, no matter what it cost. Even to the extent of fighting Sue's father in a bitter, bloody range war. Morosely, Quantrell scanned the shadowy hills ahead. They were like the bunched knuckles of a monstrous fist clenched in constant anger against the valley ranges of Hildegarde, Pelky and the other Pool members, a Gargantuan fist defending Bronson's high country domain.

It was full dark when Quantrell rested his horse on a secondary slope and sat peering back at the vast, night-shrouded void of Palomitas Valley. Pin-point dots of lamplight, looking like low stars, showed faintly at the Circle H, and that sight stirred a futile sense of nostalgia in Quantrell. It made him remember the many times he'd ridden there at this same hour to call on Sue—to sample her chocolate cake and listen to the tunes she played on the parlor piano.

There'd been no threat of impending range war then, just a stubborn struggle against drouth while they waited for rain. Now the rains had come and soon there'd be good graze again. But because some greedy son had raided the remnants of drouth-dwindled herds, there'd be bloodstains on the grass and gunsmoke stink would taint the air.

A lopsided moon, rimming the high wall of the eastward hills, flooded the lower slopes with a soft white light. As if this sudden illumination also gave the air some magic clarity, Quantrell thought he could hear Pal's remote barking. But he couldn't be entirely sure.

Riding at a slow but steady pace, Quantrell topped the crest of Rosary Ridge where jackpines dotted the rimrock. He was halfway across it when a man called sharply:

"Who are you and where the hell you goin'?"

INSTANTLY recognizing the voice, Quantrell said: "It's me, Blacky—Bill Quantrell."

A lathy, dark-skinned rider eased his horse from behind a rock outcrop and said, "Kinda off your home range, ain't you?"

Moonlight gleamed on the Winchester he held cradled across his left arm. Quantrell had never liked this reedy rider and guessed the feeling was mutual.

"I'm going up to see Bronc," he said flatly.

Gallego halted his horse ten feet away, still holding the Winchester ready for use. "Mebbe Bronc don't want to see you." he suggested.

"Why not?"

"You're a member of the Palomitas Pool, ain't you?" Gallego asked slyly.

"So?"

"Well, Bronc reckons the Pool is fixin' to fight him, which means he don't want no spies scouting his range. That's the reason I'm here."

A self-mocking smile flecked Quantrell's lips. "Even if I was still a Pool member, which I'm not, Bronc wouldn't figure me for a spy," he declared.

"I still don't think he wants to see you," Gallego said stubbornly.

"I don't give a damn what you think," Quantrell declared. "I'm going to see Bronc."

"Oh, no, you ain't!"

Just as Gallego cocked the Winchester, a gaunt, raw-boned oldster with down-swirling mustache came riding across the crest and asked bluntly: "What's all the chin music about?"

"Call off your dog, Bronc," Quantrell called with a laugh. "He's been eating too much raw meat—with the hair on it."

Bronson peered at Gallego, said: "Go on up to the house and get your vittles."

"You told me to stop anybody that come up this trail," Blacky complained.

"Yeah," Bronson growled, "and now I'm tellin' you to vamoose."

Whereupon Gallego rode off, and the Diamond B boss asked: "What you nighthawkin' around for, Bill?"

"Came to tell you that Pelky, Vedder and Hildegarde are going to give you a fight, *muy pronto*," Quantrell reported. "Thought you'd like to know."

"Been expectin' it," Bronson muttered. "Found twenty head of steers on my range today with Circle H brands worked into poor imitations of a Diamond B. That means somebody is framing a big fight and fixing to take over the whole damned country, unless I'm tol'able mistaken."

That news sent a sudden thrust of understanding through Bill Quantrell. He said: "I saw mud on Bart Pelky's boots today, and asked him if he'd had any rain. He said no, but Mike Modeen told me there was a heavy shower at the Circle H last night."

"Figgered it was Pelky's doings," Bronson grumbled. "That Pitchfork son knows none of us can afford the cost of a fight after what the drouth done to us. He knows damn well it'll bankrupt the Circle H and Diamond B both—which means there'd be easy pickings for him when it's over."

"So that's it!" Quantrell exclaimed, abruptly understanding the reason Bart Pelky had deliberately tried to prod the pool into fighting Bronson. Yet even then he couldn't comprehend all the angles of Pelky's vicious scheme. "How," he asked, "can Pelky afford it himself? The drouth hit Pitchfork as bad as the rest—worse, in fact, because he had more cattle to lose."

Then, just as Bronson opened his lips to speak, a slug slammed into the Diamond B boss and the rifle's report was instantly followed by another. Bronson loosed a gusty groan and slumped in the saddle. Quantrell endeavored to catch him, tried to keep him from falling. But the spooked bronc lunged away and Bronson fell headlong.

Whereupon Quantrell drew his gun, probing the moonlit rimrock for sign of Blacky Gallego. There was no doubt in his mind as to the drygulcher's identity, for the shots had come from the exact direction Gallego had taken.

Why, he asked himself, had Gallego shot Bronson? For what possible purpose? Then a new idea came to him. Perhaps Blacky hadn't intended to hit Bronc but had been firing at the man he'd tried to keep from visiting his boss.

ALL THIS went through Quantrell's mind during the brief interval until Gallego's gun blasted again. Then Quantrell slammed two slugs at that orange beacon of muzzle flare and heard Gallego blurt out a pain-prodded curse. Blacky didn't fire again, and Quantrell was wondering how seriously he was wounded when the sound of hard-ridden horses came from the direction of the Diamond B. That, Quantrell understood instantly, meant that Bronc's crew had heard the shooting and were coming on the run. Another thought struck him. If Bronc were dead, Blacky Gallego could convince the crew that he, Bill Quantrell, had killed their boss!

Those oncoming riders were close now, so close that Quantrell heard one of them call sharply: "Bronc, what's up?"

And heard Gallego yell: "Come on, come on! Quantrell shot Bronc—and me too!"

As Quantrell spurred his horse to headlong flight, he heard Blacky Gallego yell: "There he goes! There goes Quantrell!"

That clarion call brought a blast of guns from the oncoming riders as Quantrell galloped back across the crest. For a tumultuous moment, as slugs whined viciously close, Quantrell thought he wasn't going to make it. Yet, except for one bullet that barely burned the flesh of his left cheek, he was unscathed as he slid his horse over the rim of Rosary Ridge. But because Bronc Bronson lay dead in the dust up there, Quantrell felt no satisfaction in this narrow escape. Bronc had been his one remaining friend. Except for Pal—and Pal couldn't trip the trigger

of a gun or a rifle.

For a time, as he rode recklessly down the constantly turning trail, Quantrell searched for a method of convincing the Diamond B crew that he hadn't killed Bronc; that Gallego, for some unexplainable reason, had fired the shot which had felled their boss. But even if he could devise a means of getting to the Diamond B without being shot in the attempt, he knew they wouldn't believe him.

They were a hard-case bunch. Drifters mostly, who'd been befriended by Bronc, same as he'd been. They'd believe Bronc had caught him spying for the Pool and they'd want revenge for Bronc's killing. Which meant Quantrell would have to leave the Anchor. So thinking, he made his grim and desperate plans for survival. He'd take only what provisions he could carry in a blanket roll and hide out in the brush with Pal.

The grim understanding of how monstrously he had been tricked at every turn brought a cynical scowl to Quantrell's scarred face. Because he'd tried to avert a range war that would ruin his Pool friends, he had lost Sue and been branded as an outlaw by the Palomitas Valley group. Endeavoring to fulfill his obligation of loyalty to Bronson, he'd been daubed with the dirty mark of being a backshooting spy. Now he would be hounded by both factions. It was enough to make a man hate his own shadow.

Bill Quantrell thought he had hit bottom. He thought Bronc's death was the final link in his chain of frustration and futility. But that was before he rode into the yard at the Anchor and saw something that made him stare in squinty-eyed astonishment!

Halting his horse, Quantrell sat in shocked silence. A cool breeze which had been at his back as he entered the yard shifted so that it brought an odor of smoke to him. But Quantrell paid it scant heed for his whole attention was riveted on a still, sprawled shape near the 'dobe house —on Pal, who lay dead in the moonlit dust.

Quantrell remembered how he'd heard Pal's remote barking, and cursed himself for ignoring it. If he had turned back then, he probably wouldn't have reached here in time to save Pal, but he might've got a shot at the dirty sons who'd killed his loyal dog. Riding up to the house, Quantrell dismounted and, glancing inside, saw how completely gutted the place was. Everything had been burned: blankets, provisions and furniture. Even the cook stove had been battered into a heap of scrap iron. Nothing remained but the four smoke-blackened adobe walls.

This, Quantrell understood, was part of the payoff Bart Pelky had promised him. Glancing at the moonlit dust, he saw it was pocked by many hoofprints and guessed that the Pitchfork boss had brought his entire crew with him. Pelky, he knew then, had intended to shoot him down and had vented his spite on Pal instead, on a loyal little dog who'd tried to call his master back.

CURSING bitterly, Quantrell went over to his wagon beside the horse corral. The spokes of all four wheels had been knocked out so that the axles rested on the ground. He took a shovel from the wagon box and was walking toward Pal when he heard the Diamond B bunch gallop across the flats. Yet even then he took time to dig a grave and place Pal gently in it.

"So long, kid," he said soberly and, reaching down, petted the bloodstained fur of the companion who'd been like a living shadow, taking every step he took around this yard.

The thought came to Quantrell that now he was completely alone. Now there was nothing here to keep back the long loneliness. Quickly filling the little grave, he mounted and rode into the timber which closely bordered the Anchor's yard on the south. Halting his horse behind a windfall, Quantrell watched five riders warily approach the fire-gutted shack, heard Blacky Gallego call: "Come out, Quantrell!"

They waited for a few moments, then at a command from Gallego, fanned out,

forming a wide-spaced arc as they rode across the moonlit yard with guns drawn. Peering at the slow-motion advance, Quantrell tallied the faces of each, recognizing Fan-Tan Talley, who'd been run out of Tombstone for fatally beating a dancehall girl; Red Scully, wanted in Tucson for shooting a man in the Silver Dollar Saloon; and Haze Huffmeyer, who was wanted in New Mexico. The fourth member of Gallego's group, a slatty rider with a drooping black mustache, was new to Quantrell.

Presently, as they converged on the shack, Talley exclaimed: "It's been burned out!"

There was a brief discussion which Quantrell couldn't hear, then Gallego declared brashly: "Pitchfork saved us the terrible trouble of burning this one—which means we'll only have to torch a couple more and the job will be done!"

That didn't make sense to Quantrell. He tried to solve the riddle of Blacky's words while he watched the Diamond B bunch ride back into the brush and later as he headed his bronc toward Rincon. What, he wondered, did Gallego mean by saying that only two more burned out ranches would finish the job? What two?

Certainly Gallego didn't mean the Pitchfork. Quantrell was confident now that Blacky had deliberately murdered Bronc Bronson, that the swarthy-faced rider and the men with him were in with Bart Pelky. Then Gallego must mean the Circle H and Tate Vedder's little spread. Pelky, he guessed, would make a show of fighting the Diamond B, but only a show. When the Circle H and Vedder's place were destroyed, Pelky would pay off the Diamond B hoodlums who'd vamoose for parts unknown, leaving the Pitchfork in full control of both the Rampage Hills range and Palomitas Valley as well!

With the implications of that deduction bringing a sense of apprehension for Sue's safety, Quantrell considered riding directly to warn Jeb Hildegarde. But it would be wasted effort. The old cowman wouldn't believe the rest of the story. It was too fantastic, too monstrous for belief.

It occurred to Quantrell that it would take money to put this deal across. For Bart Pelky would have to pay Gallego and his raiders well for their part in the deal. The Pitchfork was no better off than the other outfits. They were all on the ragged edge of bankruptcy.

It was then that Quantrell remembered how eagerly Banker Sam Bafferton had urged the fight against Bronson, and how loudly he had sided with Pelky right after the hotel room shooting. That, Quantrell guessed, was the answer to this whole greed-goaded mess.

It was close to midnight when Quantrell rented a room at the Acme Hotel. The sleepy-eyed clerk said, "Number Nine," and crawled back to his cot behind the desk as Bill went upstairs.

Someone had blown out the bracket lamp at the top of the stairs, leaving the long hallway pitch dark. Quantrell lit a match and was examining the tarnished metal figure on a door when he heard a man talking in the room. The number on the door was eight and the voice was Sam Bafferton's. A whimsical grin quirked Quantrell's lips. The clerk had given him a room right next to Bafferton, who made his home at this hotel.

Then, as Quantrell was about to go on, he heard the banker say, "Cash is getting awful tight, Bart. Not many deposits these days."

Pelky's answer was clear. "Gallego ain't interested in excuses. He's got a payoff comin' and he wants it—tomorrow."

"Not so loud!" Bafferton cautioned. He said something else that Quantrell couldn't hear, and when Pelky spoke again his voice was an inaudible mutter. But Quantrell had heard enough. Going quietly to his room, he stretched out on the bed and listened for sounds of Pelky's departure. . . .

SUE HILDEGARDE was watching her father saddle up at the horse corral next morning when Sam Bafferton rode a sweat-lathered livery bronc into the yard. Even before he spoke she knew something was wrong, something urgent

enough to make Sam forget his habitual courtesy. Ignoring her, he said impatiently:

"Hurry, Jeb, we got some fast riding to do!"

"What's up?" Hildegarde demanded.

"Bill Quantrell robbed my bank last night. Cleaned out every dollar of cash money in it!"

Sue was dumfounded by this news. Bill Quantrell a thief! It didn't seem possible. Bill had his faults, he was hot-tempered and stubborn, but that he'd rob a bank. . . .

"There must be some mistake!" she exclaimed.

"There's no mistake," Bafferton said angrily. "Quantrell sneaked into my hotel room just before daylight, stuck a gun in my face and made me go to the bank with him. Threatened to shoot me between the eyes if I didn't open the safe. Then, when he'd sacked the cash, he bound and gagged me."

Sue heard a sighing curse slide from her father's lips. "If Quantrell turns that money over to Bronson, it means the old hellion can hire a whole army of gunhawks," he said grimly.

"The dirty son didn't get to the Diamond B yet," Bafferton declared. "I've got Pitchfork riders patrolling the hills and they've got Quantrell cut off, so he's hiding out in the brush somewhere between here and Rosary Ridge."

Then, as Hildegarde climbed into saddle, the banker added: "Before Quantrell left town he borrowed a pack horse from Mike Modeen, then woke up Ike Steinheimer at the Mercantile and bought out every box of cartridges in stock, along with a case of dynamite and five coils of fuse."

"By grab!" Hildegarde exclaimed. "He must be intendin' to smash every ranch in the valley! He must of gone loco!"

Bill Quantrell didn't glance at the house as he rode over to the Circle H wagonshed. He had seen Bafferton ride off with Hildegarde, knew that Sue had heard about the bank robbery and wondered if she would believe his explanation. Remembering how solicitous she'd been yesterday for Sam Bafferton's welfare after the fight, Bill decided there was no use telling her he had robbed the bank in a desperate effort to frustrate Pelky's payoff to the Diamond B renegades. Sue wouldn't believe Sam was mixed up in a crooked deal framed against her father.

So, dismounting at the wagonshed, Quantrell unloaded the pack horse, stacking cartridge cartons and a box of dynamite against the wall. Then he broke open the box, took out six sticks of dynamite and placed them in his saddle bags along with a coil of fuse. He was covering the stacked containers with an old wagon tarp when Sue called:

"What are you doing?"

She stood on the kitchen stoop with the morning's sunlight giving her face a peach-bloom loveliness. The thought came to Quantrell that he'd never seen her so early in the day. She seemed more beautiful than ever—and more unattainable.

He said, "Good morning, Sue," nudging back his battered hat.

"Why did you bring that stuff here?" she demanded.

"Because I've got a hunch it may be needed." Then he asked, "Aren't you going to offer me a cup of coffee?"

"Of course, Bill."

But she didn't smile and presently, as he sat drinking his coffee at the kitchen table, she demanded: "What's come over you, Bill Quantrell? You've shot one man, brutally beaten another, and robbed a bank—all in less than twenty-four hours."

Quantrell finished his coffee and shaped up a cigarette. Then he said urgently: "I haven't much time to talk, and what I'm going to say may sound loco. But you've got to believe me, Sue. Bronc Bronson is dead, doublecrossed by his own men, who were bribed by Bart Pelky and are taking orders from him."

"But why?" Sue demanded. "Why should Pelky bribe Bronson's renegades?"

"Because he intends to grab this whole range by staging a fake war that will cost your dad and Tate Vedder their lives before it's finished."

Sue eyed him with plain disbelief. There

was something close to derision in her voice when she exclaimed: "Why, Bill, that's utterly ridiculous!"

QUANTRELL shrugged. He'd guessed she might not believe his story, but he hadn't expected her to scoff at it. Resentment rose in him. No one had believed him yesterday when he'd tried to tell them that Bronc wasn't a cattle thief. All his talk had been wasted. It would be the same now.

So he said, "Thanks for the coffee," and strode hurriedly out to his horse. The chore he was riding to do now was strictly personal.

Shortly after noon Quantrell turned into the main trail that ran between the Pitchfork and town. Half an hour later he halted his horse and gave the nearby ranch a sharp scrutiny, scanning the Pitchfork's 'dobe house, bunk shack and sheds for sign of life. Upwards of a dozen broncs dozed in the horse corral, and presently he saw Pelky's Chinese cook toss a pan of water from the back stoop. Otherwise the place was deserted, as he'd hoped it would be.

Quantrell smiled thinly as he rode into the yard. Pelky had a much bigger layout here than he'd destroyed at the Anchor last night. The Pitchfork's owner took a greedy man's pride in the size of his headquarters spread and he would hate like hell to lose it. With that thought building a vengeful eagerness in him, Quantrell dismounted at the kitchen doorway and spoke to young Lee Sing who stood eyeing him in meek silence. "Pack up your warbag and vamoose."

"Me got big work to do," Lee Sing said politely. "Mista Bart say cook supper for ten cowboys."

Quantrell took a stick of dynamite from his saddlebags. "You'll have no stove to cook supper on when I get through," he muttered. "Better grab your stuff and git —*muy pronto!*"

The gruff command and the sight of the dynamite seemed to convince the Chinese. He padded swiftly inside. By the time Quantrell had planted a charge in the bunk shack and strung a fifteen-foot fuse, Lee Sing was trudging off down the trail toward town.

During the next fifteen minutes, Quantrell worked fast. He planted two sticks of dynamite in the house, another in the blacksmith shop and two more in the barn, stringing fuses long enough to allow him to light them all within seconds of each other. Finally he hazed the saddle band out of the corral, watered his own bronc at the trough and took a last look around. Then, as he thumbed a match to flame, he had a fleeting sense of dislike for the wholesale destruction that was to come, but his need for vengeance was strong in him. Lighting the fuses in fast succession, he mounted hastily and spurred his horse to headlong flight. Hell was going to pop and it wouldn't do to be caught close to it!

For what seemed an incredibly long interval, while his roan bronc scampered up a steep slope directly east of the ranch, there was quiet. Quantrell topped the crest and turned to look back, wondering if he'd bungled the fuses. When it came, it was a swift succession of monstrous blasts that seemed to shake the earth. A thunderous impact of sound reverberated back and forth along the valley, huge clouds of smoke and dust billowed up and Quantrell watched high-flung debris fall in graceful, slow-motion arcs on all sides of the ranchyard.

Quantrell had just turned his bronc across the crest when he saw Jeb Hildegarde and Sam Bafferton rushing their horses up the east slope. They glimpsed him at the same moment, and swung away from each other, firing simultaneously. For a fleeting instant Quantrell considered making a stand. They were in open country and he'd have a good chance of knocking them from saddle. He could then break through in the only direction that gave him a good chance of escape. For other riders, attracted by the dynamite blasts, would be converging on the Pitchfork from the south and west. But even as he snatched his Spencer carbine from scabbard he knew he couldn't shoot at

Sue's father—and he knew that Hildegarde *would* shoot at him!

WHEREUPON Quantrell wheeled back across the summit, galloped down the west slope hell for leather. He was passing the Pitchfork yard with the explosion's sooty stink strong in his nostrils, when guns began blasting behind him. Suddenly. as slugs whined wickedly close, Quantrell saw riders directly ahead of him, heard Bart Pelky shout: "That's Quantrell! By thunder, we've got him!"

The line of chinaberry trees screened him from Pelky's bunch but they didn't cut off the view of the two riders on the slope, and a bullet from one of those guns slashed across his right shoulder with a smash that made him drop the carbine.

Quantrell cursed, and tried to draw his six-gun. His right arm was useless. There was no pain, just a wooden numbness that reached all the way to his fingers. Another slug snarled past his crouched body and tore a tuft of hair from the bronc's mane. The animal squealed and pitched off at a tangent, that plunging tantrum taking it back toward the trees. Which was when Quantrell's mind grasped at a desperate straw of strategy that might offer survival. Spurring the roan into a wild run, he raced back through the trees and out beyond them at the exact moment Pelky's riders entered them fifty feet beyond him.

For a dozen seconds then, while he rode southward in full view of the riders on the slope, Quantrell held his breath. If they didn't spot him at once and cut him off, he could make a run for the timbered hills. Warily, in the almost hesitant fashion of a gambler examining his hole-card and dreading what he might see, Quantrell glanced eastward, glimpsed Hildegarde and Bafferton racing their horses downslope away from him.

They hadn't seen him double back!

Quantrell loosed a gusty sigh and leaning low over the roan's sweat-lathered withers, said coaxingly: "Just stay on your feet and we'll make it, kid, we'll make it sure as hell!"

And so it seemed. For he was within a dozen jumps of the timber before guns began blasting behind him. Blood from the wound in his shoulder had soaked his sleeve and some of the numbness had given way to sharp splinters of pain that lanced through him with each violent stride of his hard-running horse. But because bullets from those distant guns were falling far short of him, Quantrell's gaunt face wore a grin as he rode into the trees and gave the roan a much needed breather.

He was still grinning when a man stepped from behind a windfall with a gun in his hand and said: "Don't do anything foolish, Quantrell!"

It was the slatty, dark-faced man with a drooping black mustache, the strange rider who'd been with Gallego's bunch at the Anchor last night.

Bill Quantrell stared at the gun's uplifted snout. He asked dejectedly: "Who are you?"

"Jack Irwin," the man said. "Does that. name mean anything to you?"

Quantrell shrugged and went slack in the saddle. Sitting so, with blood staining his right sleeve, he looked utterly defeated and relaxed. But his mind wasn't relaxed, and the muscles of his slumped body were cocked for action. If Irwin would go careless for one instant, just long enough for him to snatch up a gun . . .

Slyly endeavoring to distract Irwin's attention, Quantrell glanced down the hill and said, "They're coming fast," and kept Irwin in the fringe of his vision. But the ready rider didn't take the bait. Instead he stepped up on Quantrell's right side and disarmed him without the slightest shift of his piercing black eyes.

He tossed Quantrell's gun off into the brush, said, "Get down," and seeing Quantrell wince as that movement sent a splinter of pain darting through his shoulder, added dryly: "Hell, you're in no shape to ride anyway."

He climbed quickly into saddle and said, "My dead bronc is over behind that windfall. There's a good Henry rifle in the saddle scabbard."

Then he rode out to the edge of the trees, far enough so that the riders below could glimpse him, and galloped eastward along the rim.

Rushing into the brush, Quantrell retrieved his six-gun, then ran to the dead bronc and yanked the rifle from the scabbard. There wouldn't be much chance to stand off those oncoming riders for long, but he might be able to pick off Pelky or Bafferton, or both of them.

Hurrying back to the rim he crouched behind a boulder, peered down the hill and then stared in bug-eyed astonishment. Pelky's bunch were riding like demons—but they were chasing Irwin.

FOR a moment Quantrell couldn't believe his eyes, couldn't comprehend this shift from certain death to a chance for survival. Then he remembered Irwin's peculiar stunt, that the dark-faced rider had given those gunhawks a glimpse of his departure. Pelky's men thought they were chasing Bill Quantrell. Irwin's actions didn't make sense. Why should the Diamond B rider steal a man's horse at gun point, then deliberately draw pursuit upon himself?

Shrugging off the riddle of Irwin's strange behavior, Quantrell trudged back into the timber. It was a long walk to the Circle H, a hellish long walk in high-heeled boots. It would take at least a full day to make it and maybe longer, if he lost much more blood. But he had to get there in time to arrange a reception for the Diamond B raiders—for the final showdown he knew would come.

It was full dark when Quantrell came to Crooked Creek. Dropping on hands and knees he drank deeply, and because the wound in his shoulder burned like a core of flame, he submerged it in the cool running water for several moments. His feet burned also, and he tried to tug off his boots but his aching feet were too swollen. Presently he drank again, shaped up a cigarette and tried to forget the pangs of hunger that gnawed at his stomach.

He was, he guessed, at least fifteen miles from the Circle H. Vedder's place lay somewhere to the east, probably not more than five or six miles. Recalling the time of moonrise last night, Quantrell crawled beneath a mesquite for an hour's rest, and promptly fell asleep.

When Quantrell awoke, he did not know how long he'd slept or what had awakened him. For a moment, while his sleep-fogged senses struggled into focus, he didn't even know where he was. Then the plain tromp of near by horses brought

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him fully alert and he heard a man declare: "Just like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"A damn tough needle and a damn big haystack," another rider complained.

Quantrell lay motionless. It was coming daylight, and he had a vague glimpse of two riders drifting through the brush on the opposite side of Crooked Creek. When they'd passed out of hearing he got up, cursing softly at the throbbing ache in his shoulder. Then, limping on blistered feet, he trudged eastward, following the stream.

He'd gone less than a mile when he heard riders off to the left and a moment later heard another group splash through the creek behind him. This concentration of riders puzzled him until he glimpsed Vedder's place so near that he recognized Tate crossing the yard with a bucket of water. Then he understood what was going on. Pelky's bunch had camped here last night. They were using this as a headquarters because he'd blasted Pitchfork out of existence.

Quantrell watched Vedder go into his one-room shack and guessed that Tate had been elected chief cook and bottle-washer for the whole outfit. The irony of that brought a cynical smile to Quantrell's lips. Bart Pelky, he guessed, would use Tate Vedder's hospitality right up until the time came to grab Vedder's range. Then his good-hearted host would be blasted down in cold blood.

Stepping softly, Quantrell circled, coming at the shack from behind and seeing a half dozen broncs in Tate's corral. Here was a chance to end the long and tedious walking. With a good horse under him he could be at the Circle H within two hours. So thinking, Quantrell eased around the shack's corner to the doorway, said, "Good morning, Tate."

Vedder stared in bug-eyed astonishment. He stood at the sink, washing dishes, and his gun gear hung on a peg near his rumpled bunk.

"What you doing here?" he demanded.

"Want to borrow a horse," Quantrell told him, and nodded at his wounded shoulder. "Reckon you'll have to saddle him for me."

Something he saw in Quantrell's eyes took the balkiness out of Vedder at once. He strode to the corral, caught up a sorrel bronc and put gear on it in sullen silence.

"Thanks," Quantrell said and climbed clumsily into saddle. Then putting an earnest appeal into his voice, he said: "Get away from here while you're all in one piece, Tate. Load your stuff into a wagon and drive into town before they burn you out."

"What the hell you talking about?" Vedder demanded. "Who's going to burn me out?"

"Gallego's bunch, on orders from Bart Pelky," Quantrell told him. "Pelky and Bafferton intend to grab this whole range."

"You're loco in the head!" Tate exclaimed.

Quantrell shrugged, knowing that further talk was useless and that he was probably seeing Tate Vedder alive for the last time. He spurred the sorrel into a swift run and was well into the trees before Vedder could race to the shack for his gun. When the shots came they were fired in threes, as a distress signal to attract Pitchfork riders. . . .

SUE HILDEGARDE was being stubborn. All during breakfast her father and Sam Bafferton had tried to talk her into going to town. Sam had scoffed at Bill Quantrell's suspicions about Pelky being in cahoots with the Diamond B bunch. Just before riding off he'd declared: "Soon as we catch Quantrell we'll ride against the Diamond B and smash that rustlers' roost out of existence."

"I'll join the hunt soon as I talk some sense into Sue," Jeb Hildegarde had told Sam.

Now he was insisting that she shouldn't stay here alone. "I think Quantrell is all wrong about Bart," he said thoughtfully, "but there's just a chance he might be right. Which is another reason why you've got to get out of here, honey."

"But what about you?" she demanded.

"What chance would you have if Bill is right?"

The old cowman sighed dejectedly. "No chance at all if the game is rigged like that. But I still think Bill is imagining things."

Which was when Quantrell rode up to the house, and Sue exclaimed: "Bill—you're hurt!"

"Nothing wrong with me that some breakfast won't cure," Quantrell drawled. Then, seeing the way Hildegarde kept his hand close to holster, he asked: "Did Sue tell you about Bronc being dead—and the rest of it?"

Hildegarde nodded, said gruffly: "Sounds like hogwash to me, and Sam Bafferton said it sounded the same to him."

"You—you mean Bafferton heard what Sue told you?" Quantrell demanded.

Hildegarde nodded.

Quantrell turned quickly to Sue, exclaimed: "You've got to get out of here then—right now!"

"Why?" Sue asked. "What difference does it make if Sam heard what I said?"

"It means that Bafferton is riding to tell Pelky that you folks know how this fight is framed—that you've both got to be gunned down before you have a chance to talk in town!"

"But Sam isn't in the deal with Pelky!" Sue insisted. "Not the range-grabbing part of it."

Quantrell told them what he'd heard last night at the hotel. "That's why I robbed the bank, so they couldn't pay Gallego's gang. I thought that might slow them up for a few days, but now they won't wait!"

"God A'mighty!" Hildegarde croaked and hurried off toward the corral. "I'll saddle your horse, Sue."

But the girl shook her head, said quietly, "I'm not leaving, Dad. I'm staying here to help out." Her first chore was to bandage Quantrell's shoulder while Bill told Hildegarde about his plan for repulsing the attack.

"We'll plant dynamite all around the yard," he explained, "with fuses long enough so we can light 'em from the house. I brought bullets enough to last us for a week."

That was when Jeb Hildegarde stuck out his rope-calloused right hand and said huskily: "Sure makes me tol'able ashamed to think I was shooting at you yesterday up there at the Pitchfork, Bill. Makes me feel lower than snake sign in a wheel rut."

Quantrell grinned, said, "That's all right, Jeb," and watched Sue dish up his breakfast. Forgetting about the signal shots Tate Vedder had fired, he said: "We'll have time to get all set for those sons before they get here."

But he was wrong, and would soon know it.

Jeb Hildegarde had toted a load of ammunition into the house and Quantrell was at the wagonshed unpacking dynamite when he heard Sue exclaim: "Here they come!"

Those three words struck Quantrell like a whiplash. Whirling instantly he drew his gun, heard Bart Pelky call: "Come out of there, Quantrell, or we'll drag you out—dead!"

For a soul-sickening instant Quantrell thought they were holding guns on him, that they had the shed surrounded and there was no chance of standing them off. But his roving glance failed to find them. When he peered around the front of the shed he realized they hadn't spotted him. Pelky and three Pitchfork riders were fanned out just beyond the corral, and they were all looking at the house!

AT THIS exact moment Sue stepped out on the front veranda and said quietly: "Bill isn't here. He left ten minutes ago."

Well, Quantrell reflected admiringly, that was the gospel truth. At least as far as the house was concerned.

"We know different," Pelky snarled. "We'll take a look for ourselves!"

Then Jeb Hildegarde poked the muzzle of his old .50-calibre buffalo gun through a front window, and called: "No, you won't, Bart. I've got your belt buckle dead center in my sights."

"What the hell!" Pelky exclaimed. "Why you shielding a damn bank robber, Jeb?"

"My daughter told you Bill ain't here," Hildegarde replied stubbornly. "Ain't her word good enough for you?"

Quantrell grinned. This, he thought urgently, might be a chance to settle part of the score in a hurry. If he could get around behind the barn, he and Jeb would have those Pitchfork riders trapped between them. With that strategy prodding him like a spur, Quantrell went back through the shed, turned the corner and saw something that halted him instantly. Sam Bafferton was standing less than ten feet away from him, peering into the barn's rear doorway!

Even as he opened his lips to call a command, Quantrell's ears caught the distant drumbeat of running horses, heard Pelky declare: "That's Gallego's gunhawk's coming, Jeb. You better put down that gun and invite us inside before they git here."

A shot now, Quantrell realized, would turn those guns loose outside and a stray slug might strike Sue. So thinking, he took a step forward, and another. If he could get close enough to Bafferton, there'd be a chance to smash him down quietly.

Cautiously, like a cat prowling a dark alley, Quantrell inched up behind Sam Bafferton. He was vaguely aware of voices out front and wished urgently that Sue would get back into the house. For the veranda was directly opposite the barn's front doorway. If Bafferton's finger should trip trigger when he was hit over the head, Sue would be in the line of fire.

There was, Quantrell decided grimly, but one way to make sure Bafferton wouldn't shoot and that was to get close enough to press a gun muzzle against his back. Taut and fine drawn with the need for haste, Bill calculated the final step he would have to take, and hoped Bafferton wouldn't hear him.

Abruptly he moved forward, jabbed his gun against Bafferton's broad back and snapped: "Drop it—quick!"

Bafferton's startled grunt was instantly followed by the thud of his gun on the door-sill. Whereupon Quantrell sheathed his own weapon and ordered: "Turn around, you stinking son!"

The banker turned, and seeing Quantrell's cocked fist, dodged into the barn. Quantrell grasped the front of Bafferton's shirt, yanked him around and tried to target his jaw with a slashing left. But the big banker ducked and, catching Quantrell off balance, slugged him with a vicious blow to the groin.

The pain of that sent Quantrell to his knees, paralyzing pain that wrenched him with swift agony. Bafferton's clubbed fists slugged Bill's head and shoulders with triphammer blows, set up a flogging rhythm that merged with the banker's gloating voice. "I've got Quantrell!" Bafferton yelled triumphantly. "I'm going to stamp his guts into the ground!"

Above that exultant bellow was the sound of Sue's voice calling urgently: "Bill, there's more riders coming!"

But Quantrell didn't answer. He couldn't. . . .

Guarding his head with both arms, Quantrell remained on his knees. During this brief, black interval of grogginess, only a fighter's instinct for survival saved him. Bafferton's mauling fists kept probing for his face, trying for a knockout blow, and when Bill tried to get up, Bafferton began using his boots. He kicked Quantrell in the side, and jumping high, endeavored to tromp him with both feet. Quantrell rocked back on his heels, warded off the boots with his hands, and loosed a pain-prodded curse as Bafferton's next kick smashed against his wounded shoulder.

The excruciating punishment of that drove the last strand of grogginess from Bill's brain. It seemed to give his bruised body a swift surge of strength.

Lunging forward, Bill forced Bafferton into the runway, took two body-jolting blows and slammed a fist deep into Bafferton's belly, knocking the wind out of him. For a brief moment then the banker made

a blocky unmoving target for Bill's eager fists. Swiftly, yet with the deliberate skill of an accomplished fighter, he swung a right that landed solidly just below Bafferton's left ear, a sledging blow that had the full power of his arched body behind it.

But even as Bafferton collapsed like a burst sack, pounding hoofs sounded loud in Quantrell's ears, and he thought: "Gallego's gunhawks are already in the yard," and heard blasting guns verify that terrifying reflection. He hurdled Bafferton's sprawled body and rushing to the barn doorway, glimpsed a mad tangle of dust-swirled riders.

CATCHING sight of Jack Irwin's dark face in the smoky confusion, Quantrell was on the point of slamming a shot at him when he saw the dark-faced man deliberately shoot Bart Pelky from the saddle. He saw another Pitchfork rider go down and still another race off in frantic retreat. That didn't make sense to Quantrell, and neither did Jeb Hildegarde's words when the old cowman yelled: "They're Arizona Rangers!"

Almost at once then the firing ceased and Jack Irwin was saying: "Bronc Bronson sent for me a month ago to get the goods on the Pelky-Gallego gang of rustlers. When I learned how big the deal was I sent for reinforcements with orders to wait in Rincon until the time was right. I was on my way to get 'em when my horse broke a leg and you came along at just the right time."

So that was it. That was why this ready rider had deliberately drawn off pursuit up at Pitchfork yesterday.

"I heard Pelky tell Gallego to raid Vedder's place today, then come here and do the same. We didn't get there in time to save Tate's life, but we caught up with Gallego's bunch on their way here and wiped 'em out."

Then, as Sam Bafferton struggled to his feet, Irwin exclaimed: "So you corralled the ringleader who planned the deal!" And holding his gun on Bafferton, he asked Quantrell: "By the way, what did you do with the bank loot?"

"Left it with Mike Modeen for safekeeping," Quantrell reported. "Thought I might want to borrow from the banker later on to rebuild my house."

Sue came rushing up, asked: "Bill are you all right?"

Quantrell nodded, and seeing her glance at Bafferton's blood-smeared face, said: "Your banker friend could use some sympathy, like last time. He got fist-whipped again."

Irwin went on into the barn, and Sue said accusingly: "You brute!"

Then she reached up with both hands, and drawing Bill's head down, whispered in his ear: "I love a stubborn, hot-tempered brute."

For a moment Quantrell just stood there in stunned silence, until she asked: "Don't you love me, Bill?"

Then he tried to find words to tell her why he'd worked and saved his money for sixteen tedious months. The words wouldn't come, so he kissed her instead.

And she seemed to understand.

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BELLED CUNNING

Her mate killed, the beautiful vixen Lak fights on for survival

LAK, the beautiful red vixen, cavorted with her lordling mate—a handsome red dog fox.

Tired at last of their play, they rested a moment or so in the birch glade, tongues lolling. Their eyes blinked as sunlight shafted down through the purpled maze of denuded birch limbs, to dapple the snow in exquisite patterns.

Lak blew the more sharply, because of her condition. Shortly, she would retreat to her den and the solitude of her own company. No longer, not for some time, would she indulge in mock battles

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

with Chun, her mate, the sire of her brood to come.

Even now, when he turned to flick at her muzzle with his warm tongue, she peeled back her lips, to display her sharp teeth as she made throaty sounds of warning.

Suddenly it was Chun that pricked up his ears as he caught the muffled crunch-crunch of footbeats in the snow.

Chun was old, a fox whose instincts had been sharpened by many seasons of alertness against the approach of his enemies here at the wild zone of his home range, surrounding Big Lake.

Chun's ears seldom played him false. He relied on them more than any other sense.

He whipped his agile body about, and broke into bounding leaps.

In a flash, Lak was on her feet, her own sharp ears cocked. But she made no immediate move to escape. Down through the four seasons of her adulthood she had learned never to break too sharply, before a potential enemy had been identified.

The enemies of her kind were many—man, fisher, lynx, wolf and coyote, and that great sky killer, Yeepek, the bald eagle. It was unwise to panic, to flee at the first sign of danger, unless the enemy were at once located and identified.

Lak relied on the alertness, the wisdom, of Chun now. He was the great one, or he would not have survived so long.

But suddenly Lak's nose quivered. A shifting wind had brought her that dread tang of a man creature.

Her beautifully-coated body quivered as she bunched her paws under her, ready in an instant to bound off.

Then came that terrible clap of thunder—made-made thunder!

Lak hesitated no longer. She broke for a patch of heavy willow breaks fringing the frozen, snow-covered lake.

No longer could she rely on Chun, nor was she in any condition now to back track and investigate. Twice in her life and the experience of motherhood, she had known her younglings to fall at the crash of that deadly reverberating man-made thunder.

Not until her heavy body sagged from exhaustion did she at last slump to rest.

Panting, she turned, thrusting her muzzle into wind, searching for Chun's scent. He had not followed in her trail.

Now a shudder passed through her form as she tanged a trace of his scent, but it was charged with the death scent.

CHUN was gone! He had paid the price of his great sagacity. No longer would the creatures about Big Lake hear his husky yapping in the nights. No longer would Lak respond to his soft, throaty chutterings in that mad mood period when he had fought and beaten back rival dog foxes for retention of his mate. . . .

Lak moved on, shifting range. But not even with all her instinctive cunning had she been able to mask her trail. In the spring, the summer and the fall, she could blot out her trail by swimming the creeks, but at snow time, her tracks were there, always.

As she moved about, she caught, from time to time, the tang of the man creature and his hunting dogs. He was out on her trail. A she-fox meant much more to him than the destruction of a dog fox.

Hunger beset the pretty little vixen. It was a fierce, relentless enemy in a cold winter, when the snows were deep. Field mice burrowed on deep beneath the windfalls in the thickets, down into inaccessible havens.

Tonight as Lak sat on her haunches near the lake's edge, blinking balefully through the frost mist at the glittering stars, she felt a surge of wild bitterness sweep through her brain. It stirred her to action, to boldness.

She missed Chun and his skillful hunting, especially at this time when she required extra food.

Alone, she suddenly whipped back along an old, snow-filled trail toward the habitat of the man creatures.

Now and then she paused, to lick her chops as she caught those warm, delectable scents which came from the area of the small homestead buildings and surrounding yard.

Now a brisk, shifting wind caused her to change her course. She broke into an easy, bounding lope toward the hill country, slowing up as at last she reached a wooded thicket.

Tantalizing odors caused her to drool, and to lick her chops, but with it all there came a dread scent, the tang of Mayek, the she-coyote, one of Lak's sharpest enemies.

Ordinarily, Lak would have given this zone a wide berth. Mayek, the she-coyote, was bigger and stronger, but in her sharp hunger, Lak became charged with boldness.

Mayek had made a big kill!

A great horned owl kroo-hrooed as it zoomed on broad, silent wings from a dark object on the snow ahead.

Lak's tongue flicked. Whenever Ahhoo, the great horned one, came to earth, there was food handy, for he was one of the mightiest of all wilderness hunters.

Now, her every nerve fibre quivering, Lak crept in. She sniffed sharply, testing for fresh coyote scent. It was evident, but Lak's nose told her that her enemy had fed contentedly—Mayek had denned.

Circling the den entrance, the little vixen suddenly whirled and darted in on a partly eaten lamb carcass. It was hers for the taking.

Silently her sharp fangs went to work. She paused a moment now and then to snick off small chunks of succulent flesh and gulp it. This kill was fresh, not yet even solidly frozen.

LAK snuffled the taint of wool scent from her nostrils, and expelled bothersome wool fibres as she continued her grim surgery.

Shortly, she clamped a fang hold on a severed part quarter.

Her beautiful brush now weaved from side to side and her eyes glowed with the ecstacy of her accomplishment. She lifted the meat, with woolly hide clinging, and tested it for weight.

Satisfied that she could carry it, she laid the haunch back against a shoulder and moved on along the back trail.

Despite her anxiety to be gone, she found Mayek's last trail and cunningly followed it for some distance until well clear of the thicket area when suddenly, she cut sharply to the south, toward a heavy fringe of willow breaks.

Not until she was two miles from the coyote den zone did she drop, to begin in earnest the biggest feast she had enjoyed in many days.

There was food left when at last Lak's stomach growled its protests. She rose, picked up the remainder of her food and moved on to her own den.

In the nights that followed, Lak hunted only in brief forays, when she was successful in snatching up a burrowed grouse or two. Her cunning was serving her well.

Within a week she had again stolen in to pilfer the kill of her enemy, Mayek.

When the time came for her to steal down deep to her nest, her body was sleek with ample fat to serve her for that delicate period as she delivered her younglings and nurtured them a day or so before venturing out along the hunt trails.

Seven vigorously squirming, hungry cubs quickly began to exact their toll.

The March winds blew hot and cold by turns. When a warm wind prevailed, it honeycombed the snow by day. By night, Lak's hunting time, the snow was sharply encrusted, a danger to her trim, black-stockinged limbs.

Her sides grew gaunt. She was forced wider afield, out over the frozen lake, whose snow surface was like a sheet of glass.

Lak stole in on the muskrat houses, cutting into the domes, then lay to await the coming of an unwary rat to rest in its upper chamber of the house.

Only now and then was Lak successful in her sharp thrusts through the

small apertures she had cut in the houses. The target was small. But when, occasionally, her jaws clamped on the back of a rat, she was well rewarded. The flesh was warm, succulent and for a short time, satisfying.

She instantly carried her kill back to the den.

Her enemies, and the enemies of her cublings, were many and now there was no Chun to give warning, to stand guard, or to spot game for her.

Come the proud day when Lak brought her younglings, one by one, out into the open sunlight.

She lay back, her eyes blinking, her face grimacing as she watched the beautiful cublings at their play. When tiny fangs pierced flesh, bringing screeches of pain, Lak was swiftly in, guttering protests. With her striking forepaw she would rock a belligerent youngster back.

THE creeks had begun to make their spring music as, day by day, the sun's strength increased.

Lak hunted the thickets and draws where the scent of grouse, or hen pheasant was warmly fresh. Shortly, these birds would be nesting. Already, the owl hatchlings were out. Soon would come the raucous honk of the Canadian Geese. They would come to rest at Big Lake, on their flight northward. Soon the ducks, the grebes, the coots and the loons would make an appearance. There would be food aplenty.

Today, Lak lay stretched in the warm sunlight which played with the various bronzy-red, black, fawn and white hairs of her lustrous coat.

Her large ears pricked sharply back and forth to catch and identify any or all sounds.

Her young ones had been nursed and now lay sprawled in random positions—legs draped over legs, or bodies, as the cublings, their bellies filled, slept soundly.

All seemed at peace in the wilderness, as if an armistice had been declared by nature during the rearing of the young.

Lak grunted contentedly. Her ears ceased to twitch. Soon she, too, snored. Her ears were cupped, her keen nose into the wind. They were her sentinels . . . but they could not catch or relay the swift movement of Yeepek, the great bald eagle. As he dived, he dived in silence.

When Lak suddenly heard the climactic "whoosh" of his great wings as he struck, it was too late to save one of her cubs. Terrible talons were clamped in the little one's back. He was being borne upward, as Lak sprang, her fangs slashing, but she snapped on a single tail feather only.

Yeepek, the mighty sky killer, screamed defiantly, as he zoomed and soared on, carrying his kill to the far tamaracks beyond the lake.

Lak gave out a sharp screech of anguish and anger as she leaped again and again before settling down, to butt her younglings back into the den.

FOR some time, chuttering mournful throat sounds, she minced about her den area.

Seldom had she been able to raise a full litter of cublings in any season. Once she had lost her entire brood: Man creatures had dug down to her nest.

A wandering fisher, evil killer of the wooded country, became a menace, forcing Lak to remain more and more closely beside her younglings.

The cubs grew rapidly, becoming more vigorous in their play, and more venturesome.

The time had come when Lak must bring them green bone to gnaw, for they required its calcium.

Thus, again Lak stole on toward the thicket at which the new coyote brood of Mayek thrived.

Mayek had made another lamb kill.

Belly down, Lak crept in, her brush laid out straight behind her. She cocked her head as her cupped ears caught the sounds of snoring issuing from the den.

NOW she stole in on the remains of a lamb carcass, a tender spring lamb this time.

Mayek had feasted well, but nearly half the carcass remained.

The pale lights of a new full spring dawn were stencilling the eastern sky as Lak trotted on with her pilfered feast.

Suddenly she was arrested by the baying of dogs, the man creature's dogs.

They had picked up the marauding coyote's scent. Man had discovered his new loss and Lak caught his scent now as he trailed his hounds.

Laying the remaining carcass down, Lak swiftly bounded back, to circle and scout. When the scent of the hounds freshened, she whipped back, seized her pilfered meat and trotted on to the creek.

The creek water, not long freed of its ice, was cold to her tender underparts as she struck upstream, hugging the shoreline.

At a point where a freshet tributary joined the main creek, Lak turned and dragged herself to the bank to rest. She tingled with concern for her young as she heard the baying of the hunting dogs.

Though she had left the six cubs deep in the den, they could not be trusted to remain there. They had reached the age of inquisitiveness; curiosity called them to venture out on their own. Even if the man and his dogs failed to find them, there was grave danger from other enemies, especially from those sudden swift attacks by Yeepek, the bald eagle, and his kind.

Lak now took to the water again and paddled furiously against the strong current until at last, near a point of exhaustion, she left the little creek and moved on to the back bay marshes. In time, weary, she reached her den, where she flopped to rest before beginning to feed.

Not for some time did Lak permit her youngsters to join her. When at last she nudged them toward the leg bones of the young lamb, she snapped her jaws sharply, or butted them back when, instead of gnawing bone, they elected to tear off and gulp chunks of the meat. More than once she had to buffet one of the cublings in the stomach, to force regurgitation.

Now she settled back to watch and to rest, as the vigorous cubs gnawed and ground on the bones.

At last, wearied of their gnawing, the younglings came tumbling in on their mother, snapping playfully at her muzzle, rocking back when she pawed them away.

Thus they gained the exercise they required and, for some days, Lak lived on in peace and contentment.

The sandy soil of her den thawed out quickly and every now and then her sleep was disturbed by the falling of small rock, which precipitated a miniature slide.

Then came a day when she sprang alertly from her rest. Above, she heard the muffled thump-thump of something big, heavy, striking the outside of her den.

She crept forward up the burrow leading to the main exit.

Her brain was aflame with concern as she tanged the dread man scent.

AGAIN, for the second time in her period of motherhood, the man creature was digging down.

Lak backed down. She caught a cub in her jaws and turned to push him on up through a narrow burrow, to an emergency exit.

But she quivered with alarm. There was no longer an emergency exit. It was blocked with solid rock.

Lak was forced back. She was trapped!

Valiantly she took her stand at the nest area. She gathered her cublings in behind her and, lips peeled back from her fangs, she waited, as more and more daylight flooded her den's interior.

And then she saw the man creature towering above; she heard his voice sounds.

"Got you at last!"

Nath Bryant, the homesteader, had been warned by other settlers not to attempt to raise sheep in this coyote-infested zone about Big Lake, but he had brought in his small band, only to suffer losses. He had laid all such losses to the coyotes, but here at this den zone, a fox den, he had come across wool. His losses had been heavy. Already this spring he had lost three of his young lambs.

Yesterday, he had dug down and destroyed an entire brood of coyote whelplings. Only by sheer accident had he come across this fox den, and now he chuckled thickly, as he patted a bulge in his pocket.

There was no escape for little Lak. Into her great quivering fear, though, there came that sudden, unaccountable desire to give battle. It was instinctive —her last resort in a desire to protect her young and herself.

She sprang, snarling. The man creature leaned sharply back, but like a flash he swung, and smacked down with the flat of his digging spade.

Lak toppled back amongst her screaming cublings. She lay still, stretched out, but still breathing.

At the man's waist belt was a gunny sack. For some time he had pondered the practicability of raising wild foxes in captivity, should he ever come across suitable specimens!

Here they were! He would select the handsomest pair and destroy the rest.

Quickly he put his plan into effect. A cubling, a beautiful little male, slashed. Bryant yelled with the pain of those fang pricks in his right wrist. But he overpowered the little one and thrust him deep into the sack.

He seized another, examined it for sex and rammed its squirming shape down into the sack.

Quickly he killed the remaining four, and now, he glared at Lak. He knelt beside her. She still breathed.

He appraised her coat, but it had no market value.

Now, chuckling, he fished into his pocket and brought out a jangling bell, on a throat strap. It was a sheep bell he had, this morning, taken from the neck of a dead bell ewe.

He secured this about Lak's neck.

"There, ye little red hellion," he said thickly. "I could have kilt you, but you'll do me a service this-a-way. You'll help scare off other critters of your kind. You'll find the hunting tough but, as the sayin' is: cunning as a fox—ye might make it."

CHUCKLING, he backed out of the exposed den, carrying the squirming younglings. His young, infant son would be amused by the antics of the little foxes as they thrived in the compound he would build for them.

Lak, the vixen, her neck belled, would run the wild hunting trails in vain. Only by the exercise of her great cunning could she ever hope to find sufficient food to keep herself alive. . . .

That jangling bell about her neck, as she ran the wild places, would be a warning to all predatory creatures.

Lak moaned piteously as the scent of death struck her nostrils.

When at last she stirred and that frightening thing about her neck clattered, she almost panicked, but the more she struggled against it, the louder and more frightening it became.

In her great sorrow she muzzled her dead young. As her every nerve grew slack and taut by turns in her grief there also surged through her brain a mounting hatred for this man creature, the killer of her brood.

Lak crept weakly out to the open where she padded about the yawning excavation. She searched wind, following up on the man's tracks for some distance as she tanged the faint scent of live younglings, blended with the man scent.

But when she approached the rail fence and caught the acrid tang of wood smoke and the scent of the big, killer dogs, she cowered down, her heart

thumping sharply.

The rustling of grass at her rear brought her whipping about. The bell clattered and a lurking she-coyote bounded back.

The coyote was Mayek. She had escaped when her brood was destroyed. The sound of Lak's bell had attracted her as so often the sheep bells had guided her to the grazing band.

Now she glared at Lak, but the little vixen had found a boldness, as if this noisy thing about her neck had brought her added defensive means. Lak sprang toward Mayek and as the bell clattered, the she-coyote whirled and broke.

As Lak moved back toward her den she coughed now and then. The leather thing about her throat was tight. She pawed at it, but it refused to yield.

As the summer wore on, Lak found difficulty in approaching to within striking distance of even the dullest small creatures which had so often been a source of food.

Lak turned her attention to the sedges adjoining the back bays of the lake where ducklings came to paddle or to rest.

Head low, moving with utmost caution, Lak stalked such succulent food morsels.

But she quivered hesitantly as she bunched for the attack. There was that noisy, clattering thing at her throat. Any sharp forward or sidewise movement of her head would sound the alarm.

Her empty belly grumbling, Lak suddenly sprang, her jaws striking unerringly. But instantly a mallard hen rose from the sedges, giving out raucous cries of alarm which aroused all species of water fowl at every bay or tule patch.

MOAKWA, the old loon, cried out his eerie banshee-like wails. Ducks, grebes and coots quacked, or chuttered in a concerted bedlam of sound.

Snipe and plovers took to the wing, shrilly voicing their cries, and in the willows fringing the lake shore, orange-winged blackbirds gathered to attack, as was their custom when nesting.

Lak minced back to dry land where, in the cover of a thicket, she began her small but delectable feast. . . .

Later, she haunted the main creek, slinking through the long grass along its bank as she hunted for unwary muskrats feeding on mud bars.

Suddenly she froze as she watched an adult muskrat and her brood. They sat up on a bar, chewing on roots which the mother had dived for, and cut at the bottom of the creek.

Now Lak moved stealthily forward, squirming snake-like, careful to avoid giving out the faintest warning from that alarm at her neck. Her cunning brain had already formulated a climactic stroke.

Now she rose, slowly, an inch at a time, and bunched her pads under her for the leap. Her timing would have to be most accurate, for the rat brood had only a few feet of mud bar to scuttle across to reach the safety of the water.

Now, she sprang, hurling her lithe form superbly at the flat, but as her paws struck, they sank deeply into the soft mud. Her jaws clacked on emptiness.

As her legs had sunk sharply, her throat had gone down. She was suddenly aware as she shook her head savagely in her frustration, that the bell clapper had become clogged with mud.

Lak left the creek and trotted back to the cover of a nearby thicket. Conscious that the alarm at her neck was now silenced she whisked her body into a series of acrobatics, but no sound disturbed her.

Lak gave out a low, husky sound of ecstasy, as if declaring her mastery of the frightening thing at her throat.

Now her keen ears caught a rustling in the thicket at her right rear. Soon, she had rushed and fastened her jaws on an unwary ground squirrel.

Lak fed well this day. There was no need for her to hunt the night trails at all.

As autumn matured, and Lak had cun-

ningly mastered the art of plugging her bell clapper at will, she thrived at the sedges and along the draws. When the dried mud fell out of the bell's dome she replugged it by wading into the ooze of the lake marshes, or deep into the mud of a soft bar at the creek.

But the younglings of the waterfowl creatures, as they matured, developed an awareness of her lurking presence, as did the young of the thickets and draws.

Lak at last turned her nose toward those warm, inviting scents issuing from the area of the man creature. Though she quivered with fear, she revived a sense of deep and lasting hatred whenever she tanged the man scent.

Each evening, as the purple-gray ashes of dusk fell softly to drape her wilderness range, she became more and more obsessed with a desire to make a big kill—a bigger kill than had been her custom of late.

THIS evening, as she crept up close to the rail fence, she was suddenly halted by the intermittent clatter of bells; bells similar in tone to the one about her neck.

Lak shook her head vigorously, dislodging the block of hard, dry mud from her bell. She crept under the lower fencerail and snaked along through the high oats stubble, toward the bedded-down sheep band.

Slowly, scarcely breathing, Lak inched along. When a belled ewe shook her head and her bell jangled, Lak subsided. She stirred and gave out brief notes from her own clapper.

Shortly, she was almost directly in the midst of the band. She had come up with the wind favoring her. Cud chewing ewes had their sterns to her as they faced the wind.

Close beside Lak stretched a lamb in deep sleep.

Lak flicked her drooling chops with her tongue and commenced a sidewise glide toward him. Nearer and nearer she approached. When her bell clattered, she froze, but no alarm was raised.

Suddenly she struck. Her timing was good. Her fangs penetrated deeply as she cut off a muffled blat by the struggling lamb. Lak savagely jerked her head to one side, and the wooly creature subsided, to kick feebly.

Although she had no power to plan revenge, revenge had come. Instinctively, she had, since the loss of her young to the man creature, been urged to strike at these, his creatures.

As she swiftly went to work to rip wooly hide from the dead creature's flank, she was startled by the sudden yapping of a hunting coyote. She identified the sound as the hunt cry of old Mayek.

Shortly, from other points, answering cries came.

Lak was alarmed!

So were the adult members of the sheep band, now on the hoof. A big ram blatted gutturally. Bells jangled.

Lak went swiftly to work. She cut and tore and soon her fangs had, like lancets, cut a suitable haunch from the carcass.

The little vixen clamped a jaw hold on this haunch and raised her head. It was as much as she could do to navigate with this load, but as four coyote shapes stole in under the fencerail, Lak whirled and hurried on as best she could, leaving the greater part of the carcass to her enemies.

The sheep band broke in a wide helter-skelter stampede toward the huddled homestead buildings.

Lak did not pause to rest until she reached the bank of the creek, where she laid her meat supply down. She was blowing sharply when suddenly she caught the wild baying of the dogs.

Lak took to the water and headed on downstream. Now and then she snuffled as her heavy load dragged her muzzle below the surface.

The wild baying of the dogs became louder, then all at once Lak's body stiffened momentarily as the wilds were shattered by that dread, blasting thun-

der. At last, at a shallows, Lak turned out and scrambled on through a labyrinth of windfall timber, into a wild fruit thicket. There, in a small clearing, she laid the lamb meat down.

She back-tracked to search wind for danger sign. Now she cocked her head. The baying of the hounds was receding. Lak had escaped. The man and his dogs were on the coyotes' trail.

SOON, Lak was enjoying her feast with great relish, purring, grunting in complete contentment. Again her great cunning had served her well.

Throughout the following day, Lak caught the faint sounds of the hunting dogs.

It was their baying that, this evening, brought Lak a visitor. She rose sharply to her feet as she caught the scent of one of her kind. Now her lips peeled back and her brush began to twitch as she saw the shadowy outlines of a big dog fox.

As the newcomer's eyes glowed, Lak challenged. He minced forward, a big, handsome cross fox.

He came toward the vixen licking his chops. This was not the mating season. This vixen had no right to exercise a prerogative of majesty, of leadership.

The dog fox had tanged the remains of Lak's kill. He was hungry. Suddenly he sprang and with closed jaws, struck Lak to one side.

She spilled backward, but recovered, snarling as she struck. But the dog fox whirled to meet her attack. His fangs slashed, then suddenly he rose on his hind pads, snarling fiercely as his incisors became fouled in the throat strap about Lak's neck.

As he worried and flung his head from side to side in an effort to free his jaws, the cross fox almost strangled Lak, whose breathing was almost completely cut off. Suddenly, the male savagely flung his head to one side.

The strap was severed, the bell clattering to the ground as, gasping, Lak tottered back.

She lay quietly for some moments, while the dog fox flopped to help himself to a part meal.

Now, recovered, Lak got to her feet. She shook her head and backed sharply away, for there was no customary clatter of the clapper against the bell metal.

Lak sprang high, whipped about in mid-leap, flirting her body in the wildest type of acrobatics. She rolled on the ground in the ecstasy of realization of her freedom.

Now she lay, her black-stockinged forelegs stretched before her as she blinked at the newcomer.

When at last his hunger was appeased, he turned. Lak shrank back, pulling in her muzzle as he thrust his nose toward her. Slowly, gradually, their noses made contact. Lak's tongue flicked out and the dog fox made soft murmuring sounds as Lak laved his muzzle.

By dawn, they were bedded down, side by side.

At the coming of the following twilight, they stole in on the sedges to hunt.

For a week, while the first heavy frosts transformed their wild range to a place of glittering, multi-tinted glory, they feasted regularly of such unwary creatures and birds as they could catch.

This evening, it was Lak whose keen ears caught the tell-tale jangle of the sheep bells.

The sheep had come down to the shallows of the creek to drink, not long after sundown.

Lak led her new companion on. Again her brain was aflame with the desire to kill the bigger game, a creature which she so closely associated with man.

AS THEY neared the creek, the big cross fox male hesitated. He stood, a forepaw raised, his head cocked. Never before had he mustered enough courage or boldness to take him into a kill of such creatures, but Lak, the vixen, was sliding on through the willow breaks, toward the creek.

When the bell suddenly clattered, the dog fox spun and almost bounded off, but Lak lay quietly behind a hummock close to the shallows, waiting—waiting, with infinite patience for the band to finish its drink, and move back.

Now the dog fox slid in beside her. She touched his muzzle with her tongue.

Shortly the sheep band moved back to start toward their home bedground.

Two small lambs sprang, and whirled to begin their nightly play.

Lak blinked her sharp eyes. There lay her quarry!

As, hazed along by the big ram, the main band entered the willow thicket screening, Lak slid into the water and, casting no shadow whatsoever, glided across to the far bank. Her companion followed closely in her trail.

The lambs had backed off to poise for a mock-battle thrust.

Suddenly they bounded forward, then before their heads met, to butt, they rose and whirled away.

This was Lak's cue! She sprang and her fangs struck with expert timing. Like a streak, her companion flashed to her aid and shortly, between them, they made the kill.

The second lamb had gone blatting to join the main band which hurriedly stampeded along the narrow packed trail.

Quickly Lak put her cutters to work. It was not long before she had cut out the best part of a hind quarter.

She did not wait for the dog fox to cut free a like haunch for himself. Lak instinctively sensed that this had become a danger zone.

Again she led off toward the creek, followed by her potential mate.

By nightfall, they were in a dense thicket, adjacent to a coyote den.

There, for the night and for all the next day, they rested—feeding when hungry, playing when the desire for play stirred Lak.

On the second day she was startled by the sound of baying dogs.

The time had come to evacuate the sector—change range entirely.

They struck water, and not until the creek brought them to the deeps of a timber belt did Lak turn in, scrambling up a sloping windfall cottonwood to the safety and security of dry land.

Instantly she pressed forward, taking advantage of one windfall after another, blotting out trail as she penetrated deeper and deeper into the woods.

In the night, the dog fox patrolled the area, searching wind, scouting for danger sign; but it was light, too distant, to alarm them.

Lak snuggled her body luxuriously into the soft moss. No longer was man or his dogs of concern.

DAY after day they slept side by side, Lak and the handsome creature which would sire her next brood of cublings. By night, they hunted, expertly catching bush partridge and foolhen grouse.

Time wore on. Together they listened at last to the honking of south-bound geese. Soon would come the first whipping snows and later that pale, creamy mad moon in January, when Lak would lead her mate into the more isolated deeps of their new hinterland range.

Lak's eyes blinked. She turned in and laid her lower jaw across the back of the stretched out cross fox.

A coyote in the distance wailed, but save that her ears pricked back and forth, Lak was undisturbed.

Soon the quieting anaesthesia of sleep overcame her and her eyes closed.

No longer would she tang in her sleep that dread man scent. Here with a mate to help bring warning of any sort of danger, was security. Security for her now, and later, for her new brood.

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Cow Country NEWS ROUNDUP

A New Department of Western Facts

BELIEVE it or not, cattle rustling is a bigger problem in the West now than it ever was in the gun-toting days of the past. The records prove it.

In 1949 in Colorado alone stock loss to rustlers was officially estimated at a cool million dollars.

Secretary David Rice of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association says, "Mostly, the cattle thefts are of one or two calves at a time."

Wyoming cattlemen are also up in arms over the rash of one to five animal thefts. Whole herds are not driven off as they were in the days of the open range.

Instead fences are cut in the dead of night and a few calves are stealthily loaded into the rustlers' waiting truck.

By morning the rustlers may be hundreds of miles away, and more than likely across the state line.

This new kind of rustling is more difficult to stop than the old-fashioned, spectacular range robberies where many cattle were driven away in the thunder of pounding hoofs. Nevertheless drastic steps are being taken to halt it.

Going as modern as the truck rustlers, the Wyoming Cattlemen's Association has planned an active anti-rustler campaign that will include the use of ranchers' privately owned airplanes and such things as short wave radios.

Another approach to the problem has been made by the Federal Government. Under the recently enacted National Cattle Theft Act, today's cattle rustler is in the same category as a kidnaper. Cattle stealing is a federal offense.

The new law makes the transportation of stolen cattle, dead or alive, across state lines punishable by a maximum fine of five thousand dollars or imprisonment for five years, or both. Receivers of rustled cattle are liable to the same punishment.

But the nervy rustlers seem willing to take the chance. At today's prices yearlings are worth about $200 apiece—on the hoof.

FOR years Suicide Gulch kept its secret. Kept it until Uncle Sam's scientists finally solved the riddle of the dread valley's three hundred twenty deadly acres.

Mysterious death lurked in the earth of the gulch. Every blade of grass was poison. The flowers smelled like rotten eggs, and each swirl of windswept dust was a lethal witch's brew.

The strange valley turned murderer by a quirk of nature lies southwest of Pueblo, Colorado, in what is now part of the San Isabel National Forest. The valley's yellow, red and purple walls have been eroded by the winds of centuries. Its floor is covered with semi-desert plants, milk vetch, lambsquarters and such.

Wild animals never linger there. Jackrabbits race across the valley without stopping. Bees avoid the place's poison blossoms. Birds seldom light in Suicide Gulch.

About twenty years ago a sheepherder halted his band of 200 woolies in the valley. Next morning 197 of his sheep were dead, the remaining three glassy-eyed and staggering.

Hurrying out of the place the herder spread the news far and wide. Suicide Gulch became a legend. Some believed it; others didn't.

Finally Government officials became interested. Finally after much research a scientist from the Bureau of Chemistry and Soil in the U.S. Department of Agriculture solved the valley's riddle of death.

The answer lay in the earth itself. The valley soil contains selenium, a poisonous, non-metallic element in abnormally high proportions. Suicide Gulch was actually providing its own poison. The secret is out, but the lonely valley is still shunned by Colorado sheepmen.

The Bachelor Creek run was a two-bit railroad with gold-plated trouble

JERK LINE

By WILLARD LUCE

BOB NEWELL pulled morosely on the fat cigar as his finger and thumb turned it around and around in his mouth. The smoke, strained through his long pointed mustache, and covered the bitterness in his gray eyes.

He reached for the throttle and pulled it out to the last notch.

More steam, man, more steam!" he growled at the fireman. "You want to have to push this puffin' billy over the top?" He snorted and smoke came out

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through his nose. "To think I'd end my days running a puffin' billy!" Disgust was heavy in his tone.

Pete Adair eyed his chief as he slung a couple of logs into the firebox.

"You're blame lucky to be running even a puffin' billy, Bob, and you know it," he said sourly.

Although Adair was no taller than the engineer he was just as slender as Bob Newell was fat. He always claimed it showed who did the work on the runs, for Bob Newell and Pete Adair had been together in one cab or another for close to twenty years.

"And just why am I lucky?" Bob Newell wanted to know. "I'm as good an engineer—better, by glory—than I was the day we took the Jefferson out of Chicago. Right now I can run circles around any two engineers down on the main line, and you know it, Pete Adair!"

"Not only that, Bob, but you can drink more liquor and get in more fights than any four of 'em."

Bob Newell snorted. He pulled on his cigar in quick, angry puffs until the smoke was issuing out of his mouth in the same manner that other smoke was puffing out of the balloon stack in front of the engine. At last he pointed his cigar at the fireman.

"I never once took a drink inside a cab, man, and you know that too!" he said defensively.

"And you never refused one outside it."

Bob Newell snorted again. But he didn't argue further. He knew Pete Adair too well, and Pete knew him. He just sat there in a slumped silence, brooding over things as they were. Two weeks before, he had been driving one of these new engines down on the main line. Now he was nursing a "puffing billy" up a branch line over the Wasatch Range. And all because he had got full of red-eye and got into a fight with a man named Tracy Hawkins he had run into in a saloon up the line.

Under his breath he cursed Hawkins. The fact that he had half knocked the man's head off didn't lessen his anger against him at all. For Tracy Hawkins had testified before Old Billy Simms and all the other railroad bigshots that it had been Bob Newell who had started the fight.

"He's a cussed two-faced liar!" Bob Newell had told them.

He repeated that to himself now, there in the cab. He hadn't started the fight. True, he hadn't given it even a fraction of an inch to get past him, and maybe had moved just a little closer to it, but he hadn't started it.

"It's a fine country when a man can't have a friendly little scrap without gettin' canned for it," he muttered.

Pete Adair looked at the steam gauge and threw more logs into the boiler. He smiled a little as he watched the engineer's sulky face. Then he went to his side of the cab and looked out.

"Better come out of the day-dream, Bob," he advised. "There's a fire up ahead and it looks like it's on the track."

Bob Newell jerked erect and peered into the darkness ahead of the engine. One look at the fire and the engineer became a different man. A grin spread over his broad face and the cigar pointed jauntily upward. He jerked rapidly several times on the whistle cord, then carefully commenced rolling up his sleeves.

"It wouldn't be robbers now, would it, man?" he said.

It was Pete Adair's turn to snort.

"Robbers? What would robbers want to hold up a string of empties for?"

"I wouldn't know—but just let one of 'em get close enough for a good swing!" Newell doubled a rock-hard fist and squinted at it with one eye. "Just one good swing is all Bob Newell ever needs, man, and you know it, too."

But Pete Adair wasn't listening. He was watching the fire ahead.

"It's on the tracks, all right, Bob. And somebody's standing beside it."

THE engineer grunted as he sent one short, shrill whistle into the night. "Then it ain't no robber," he said in a disgruntled voice, working the throttle

and the emergency brake.

He eased the freight to a stop ten yards from the fire. Swinging out of the cab, he moved toward the lone figure beside the fire, like a bear moving down on a sheep.

"What you tryin' to do?" he demanded. "Wreck us?"

The man who whirled toward him was a tall man, narrow-built and flat of muscle. His eyes picked up more light from the burning piñon limbs than did the sheriff's badge on his vest.

"I'm tryin' to get a ride," he said. "And don't tell me you'd have stopped if I'd built this fire out in the brush. I've tried it before."

He moved into the center of the track and started kicking the limbs off the grade. Bob Newell didn't offer to help but stood by watching, and secretly hoping one of the sparks would fly up the officer's pants leg, and feeling right unhappy when it didn't.

Pete Adair came up with the engine's shovel and threw dirt over the burning ties.

"All right, let's get goin'," the sheriff snapped. "I ain't got all day." He moved toward the cab in long angry strides, muttering to himself. "There ain't nothin' lower'n a hobo who'll shoot a horse from under a man and leave him afoot in the middle of nowhere."

They climbed into the cab and Newell pulled the whistle cord for the release of the brakes. After a little he got the signal to go ahead. But it wasn't as easy as all that. They had stopped while still on the grade and it was almost more than the old wood-burner could do to get the train rolling again.

The engineer cursed the puffing billy thoroughly and then started in on the man wearing the badge.

"Anybody but a bowlegged, high-heeled jackass would have had sense enough to stop a train on the level."

Suddenly he stopped and squinted an eye at the stranger who was standing tall and hard against the edge of the tender. Even the warm glow from the firebox didn't soften his rugged, rockhard face or the straight line that was his mouth, or still the strange, cool glitter that came from his squinted eyelids.

"Nope," Newell snorted, "you ain't old. Cussed if I can see how anybody can get so dumb and not be any older."

"Shut up, Fatty, before I push your face in." The man spoke quietlike, and with the air of a man who knew his own abilities.

Bob Newell swung about and faced him. Again that grin was on his face and the glow of his cigar pointed upward. Deliberately and carefully he took one more roll on his sleeve.

"Is that there a promise, man?" he said softly.

Before the sheriff could answer, Pete Adair stepped between them.

"Just in case you've forgot, Bob, your job is runnin' this train, not fightin'. You get yourself canned once more and I won't be with you."

Bob Newell snorted, but he turned back to his throttle. He sat there silent and brooding, remembering all the injustices done to him, and inventing a few for good measure. Vaguely through his thoughts came the conversation that Pete Adair was having with the law officer. "Slim" Bullington, his name was, and he wasn't a sheriff—just a deputy.

"They busted into the bank over in Duschene about noon," Slim Bullington was saying, and his words were short and crisp. "Three of 'em. They headed over south but I figgered they'd swing this way and they did. Then just at sundown they popped my horse right out from under me. And here I am."

There was more but Bob Newell didn't listen. He had enough troubles of his own without having to listen to those of some half-baked deputy.

"Trouble is," Newell told himself, "they hit the wrong jackass." He looked out the cab and the engine seemed to be creeping. "More steam, man!" he called to Pete Adair. "We never will get over the hump at this rate."

The fireman looked at the gauges.

"We're about out of water, Bob. I don't know if we can make it much farther."

"There's a water tank just over the top, about three miles from here," the deputy informed them.

"Then throw in another log and spit in the boiler," ordered Newell. "I'm not in the habit of walkin' into a station and carryin' the water back in a teacup."

As Adair tossed another log, he heard the engineer emit a string of curses. Turning to his own window he looked past Slim Bullington and chuckled softly at the fat man's grief.

Up ahead was another fire, full in the center of the tracks.

Bob Newell was reaching for the whistle cord when what Slim Bullington said stopped him short.

"Pull that cord and it'll be the last living thing you ever do!"

He stood back by the logs in the tender now. The two men turned their heads toward him. He had his gun out, pointed at the center of Bob Newell's round body.

"You know what happens when one of these things goes off the tracks and the boiler cracks open and the steam and scaldin' water comes out and runs all over you?" Newell said. "No? I didn't think you did."

He shoved the throttle and worked the brake, at the same time pulling the whistle cord, a signal to the brakeman to start twisting the hand brake.

"This is as bad a run as any man ever made—worse, by glory!" he growled. "It's the devil who made it, nobody else."

A MOMENT before the train jerked to a stop, Slim Bullington stepped back into the tender. His words barely reached the two men's ears.

"Just remember you never saw me, Fatty."

Bob Newell didn't look back. Outside the window were a dozen men on horseback. The man in front had a star pinned to his vest.

"Didn't see a long, slim jasper afoot down the line, did you?" he called.

"What you think I am, an owl?"

The men laughed good-naturedly enough, but beneath that laugh was a grimness that the engineer and the fireman and even the man hiding in the tender couldn't miss.

"We thought he might have tried to board the train. If he does, don't take any chances. Three robbers busted the bank over in Duschene. They split up a few miles back and the slim one came this way. One of our deputies caught up with him a couple miles from here. The deputy is still there and so is his horse, dead. We found the bandit's tracks and he was afoot. But we can't find him."

"Thanks for the warning, Sheriff." Bob Newell's voice had lowered and the anger had gone out of it. "Now will you get the fire off the track before we have to push this blame puffin' billy up to the next watering tower?"

They cleared the tracks and the engineer finally got the string of empties rolling once more.

Pete Adair came over and reached for a log to throw on the fire. Slim Bullington cracked him over the head with a gunbarrel and knocked him out.

"Now there'll only be one of you to watch," he growled.

"You did a fool trick then, man," Bob Newell said coolly. "Now you'll have to heave in the sticks to make this teakettle go."

"Not me, Fatty. You'll do the heavin' yourself."

Newell watched the man out of narrowed eyes while he carefully turned the cigar round and round in his mouth.

"It's against all the rules of the railroad, man," he finally said. "A driver's supposed to keep his seat while the train's goin'."

Slim Bullington laughed a harsh, mocking laugh.

"Against the rules, huh?" Then he motioned with his gun, and he wasn't smiling any longer. "Come on, Fatty—come on!"

Bob Newell came off his seat and threw the wood into the boiler. Nothing in the world could Slim Bullington have done

that would have caused the engineer to hate him quite so much. Bob Newell, who had been a driver from New York to 'Frisco, who had throttled every important engine built in his day, firing a puffing billy!

He went back to his seat and all the bitterness he had felt toward Old Billy Simms and Tracy Hawkins was now turned against the slim bank robber who sat so arrogantly on the fireman's seat.

They reached the top of the grade and moved along the level. The water was dangerously low, but the tower couldn't be much farther now. Newell threw another stick into the boiler.

Outside it was lighting up fast. Newell could make out the shapes of the hills and of the trees as they flashed by. He strained his eyes to see the tower ahead. Then he heard Slim Bullington's voice close behind him. "No need to get anxious, Fatty. It's quite a little stretch yet."

Bob Newell turned. Bullington extended his hand with a pint flask held loosely between his fingers.

"Have a drink?" he insisted.

Newell looked at the bottle and at the Bourbon brand and he went suddenly dry inside. He met Bullington's eyes, noting the twisted smile on the outlaw's lips.

"It's against the rules to drink inside a cab, and you know it!" He turned back to his window fighting the dry, sticky taste inside his mouth.

Bullington laughed shortly. "Have it your own way. If you should change your mind, though, it'll be right here." He laid the bottle down where Bob Newell could see it, and the engineer cursed uneasily.

There was something bigger in this than just offering him a drink. Bob Newell sensed it even before Bullington asked his next question.

"This line goes right on through Bachelor's Creek and down the mountain to Soda Basin, don't it?"

"The line past Bachelor's Creek was abandoned more'n a year ago," Newell answered briefly. "The silver petered out."

"But the rails are still there?"

The engineer nodded, waiting for what else might come, but Bullington didn't say anything further. Instead, he kept twisting his head out the window as though looking for something.

Newell pondered what the outlaw had said. Although this was his first run on this line Bob Newell knew the history of it well enough. Once it had been a right nice little run. Then, as he had said, the mines at Soda Basin had petered out and they had abandoned the last forty miles of the trip. Bachelor's Creek was still going strong, with a payroll of well over a thousand men, but there were rumors that the high grade was finished there too. Another week, another month, and this part of the line might be finished also.

SLIM BULLINGTON was yelling for him to stop. Past the outlaw Newell caught a glimpse of a rider racing parallel with the engine. He swung around and looked out his side of the cabin and found another rider bearing down there too.

Newell shook his head. "We stop this thing now and we'll never get it started again!"

"I said, stop it!"

Bullington leaped toward him, but

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Puttin' a hand-tooled, silver-conchaed saddle on an ornery old cayuse is about the same as prettyin' up some folks in fine clothes. It don't change the nature of the critter under the kak.

Newell had twisted around and to his feet, standing there, feet braced, his right fist cocked. That devilish grin parted his lips, and his eyes danced. Bullington dragged his gun from its holster.

"Now, by the tarnation blazes—"

Before he could finish, one of the riders had caught the ladder, pulled himself from the horse and clambered into the cab. A moment later the other one came up. Both men carried heavy saddle-bags.

Bob Newell stared at the second man. Tracy Hawkins! Hawkins met the engineer's eyes and his lips split into a grin.

"Well, well, if it ain't my old pal, Newell."

Newell pulled at the short stub of his cigar and turned it around in his fingers. "You're looking fine," he said. "Finer than you did at Mickey's the other night, Tracy."

Tracy Hawkins was heavy-set, taller than Newell, and he carried the scars of many fights on his hands and face. But it was his eyes that marked him a fighter. They were cold-gray, hard, and calculating, and they never relaxed. Now his eyes moved over the cab, stopped for an instant on the bottle of liquor, then came back to Newell's face. The grin had left his lips. "By the eternal, Newell," he growled, "some men take a lot of learning."

The engineer shot a quick look at the bottle and his face colored.

"I never took a drink inside a cab in my life, Tracy, and you know it, too!"

At first Tracy Hawkins just grinned. Then he broke out in a loud guffaw, and in a moment all three men were laughing loud and heartily while Bob Newell just stood there puffing clouds of smoke and getting redder and redder.

"Tell that to Old Billy Simms," Tracy Hawkins suggested.

"That I will!"

"And we'll tell him what we know."

The three had stopped laughing now and stood there, still and expectant. The third man, Lon Spencer, was tall, with stringy muscles like Slim Bullington. His hair, sticking out from under his hat, was a brilliant red. He seemed content to just watch and listen, and let the others talk.

Bob Newell carefully removed the cigar stub from his mouth and tossed it out of the cab. He wasn't forgetting that it was Tracy Hawkins' testimony about their fight that had caused Old Billy Simms to give him this puffing billy, though of course Simms had believed Hawkins was a respectable cowman, not a thieving outlaw. And now Hawkins was here, and he and these other two men were wanting something. This planted bottle was the threat they were using to get it.

"What is it you want?" he demanded.

"Now that's right down smart of you," Tracy told him. "Ain't it, fellers?" When the others nodded, Tracy went on: "Well, sir, it's like this. We've got a call to make in Bachelor's Creek, and after that we're goin' on to Soda Basin—in this cab. You're doin' the driving."

Bob Newell could figure percentage without pencil and paper. Here there wasn't any. Why they had bothered to plant the bottle he couldn't figure, for once he made that Soda Basin run he was through with railroading.

Granted he lived—which he doubted he would, once the run was made—Old Billy Simms would never listen to his story. Simms had made it clear that this was the test run accorded him by the grace of Old Billy Simms. If he failed, Simms would see that he was blackballed.

Suddenly, he caught the flicker of Pete Adair's eyes as the fireman lay on the floor back of the three outlaws. Bob Newell pulled hard on his freshly lighted cigar, shrugged and turned back to the throttle. The tension suddenly went out of the three men and they laughed.

"Don't get any wrong ideas," Slim Bullington said.

Then from out of the gray morning came the bulk of the water tower, and Bob throttled the wood-burner to a stop.

"All right, Fatty, hurry it up," Slim told him. "We ain't got all day. The payroll's ready and waitin'. If we don't get there soon they might not save it for us."

As the three men laughed Slim moved out so he could keep Bob Newell in sight,

while the engineer climbed onto the water car. The opening was too far back and Newell had to swing the end of the spout that way. He held it there while the cold, clear water gushed out.

He gathered himself and, when the tank was full, leaped toward the cab, pushing the water spout in front of him. The icy water splashed over the wood and onto the men who gasped for breath. The full force of the stream caught Spencer across the side of the head, almost felling him.

Then Bob Newell came off the tender in a flying leap. His weight crashed against Tracy Hawkins, knocking the outlaw backward out of the cab. Newell swung around, to catch Lon Spencer dragging at his gun. He gave him that one good swing, smashing his fist hard against Spencer's flat stomach. Just to make sure that one good swing was enough, Bob Newell swung again. The blow almost flipped Spencer end for end.

AS HE turned to see how Pete Adair was doing with Slim Bullington he heard the roar of Tracy Hawkins' gun and felt the burn of lead across his body. He twisted from sight as Adair and Bullington went out the other side of the cab, fighting and twisting and clawing.

Bob Newell felt the sting of another bullet, jerked his head upward, and saw Tracy Hawkins on the water tank ladder drawing another bead. He wheeled toward the tender and took the shot in the side. As Newell groped for Lon Spencer's gun, Hawkins made a fatal mistake. Intentionally or not, one of his bullets shattered the bottle of bourbon.

Bob Newell watched it mutely, then emitted as beautiful a snort as ever came out of a diamond stack. With Lon Spencer's gun in his hand, he leaped to his feet in time to see Tracy's boots disappear up the water tower ladder. The engineer sprang from the cab and raced around the tank. But Tracy Hawkins was already up inside it, resting on a crossbeam and pushing fresh shells into his gun.

Bob Newell started up the ladder. He didn't take his eyes off the top of it. He was halfway up when Hawkins' gun arm and head suddenly appeared. Lead streamed out of the gun, whipping the air. Newell took aim and shot. Tracy Hawkins dropped and hung limp over the edge of the watering tower.

Bob Newell came back down the ladder, feeling sick and weak, now that it was over. Reaching the ground, he turned and found Pete Adair at his side, bruised and beaten, but grinning happily. Both whirled around as they heard the pounding of horses' hoofs coming up the track. The posse they had passed the night before!

"We went on down the road and found where the fire had been in the middle of the track," the sheriff told them as soon as he found out how things were. "Then we guessed the answer and we've been ridin' lickety split ever since."

Lon Spencer and Slim Bullington were alive, and Spencer was willing to talk.

"When Tracy found out you'd been put on the Bachelor Creek run, Newell," he said, "he figgered it would be smart to get even for the beating you give him, and pull a couple jobs at the same time. We robbed the bank in Duschene and headed this way to pull off the posse. Then we caught the train, figgerin' to slip through on it and get the payroll at Bachelor's Creek this morning. After that we was goin' to make you run us down to Soda Basin where we got hosses ready. That's about all—only it didn't work out that way . . . And Tracy shore was goin' to salivate you when we got to the Basin."

"I believe you'll find the loot of the Duschene bank in a couple of saddle-bags up in the cab," the engineer told the sheriff. Then, as an afterthought: "Oh, another thing. Would there be trouble like this very often on this run?"

"Well now, I wouldn't like to scare you," drawled the lawman, "but we do have a heap of it. Not too much, but enough."

Bob's grin spread all over his face.

"Fire her up, man!" he shouted to Pete Adair. "We'll be likin' this run as good—better—than any we ever had. And you cussed well know it, too. Fire her up!"

A Novelet by SAMUEL MINES

RUN, SHEEP, RUN

Government man Martin Jackson believed no price too big for peace on the range—even his own life, if need be!

CHAPTER I

No Grass for Sheep

MARTIN JACKSON, the government man, heard the heavy reports of gunfire slamming its echoes back and forth among the timbered hills and, more faintly, the terrified blatting of sheep. He swung his big horse off the road and sent it crashing through a grove of young mountain birches and up the side of the steep ridge between himself and the sounds.

The dread noises came louder as his horse topped the ridge and sure-footed his way among the boulders and bushes while Jackson sought for a way down the other side.

He was a tall man and thin, with his long legs sticking straight down so that he needed a big horse to clear himself of the ground. He had a long melancholy face, but there were little crinkles about the corners of his severe mouth which hinted that he might smile easier than suspected. His clothes were the clothes of any range rider—faded blue shirt, levis, leather chaps and a wooden handled six-gun hugging his thigh.

He was, in fact, range born and bred. The Department of the Interior had been wise enough to select a mountain man to put in charge of government lands and grazing leases.

Horse and rider found a way down, plunged headlong through briars and a grove of young aspens and burst out into a tilted mountain meadow, bright with sun and grass.

The meadow was a blur of motion and sound. Sheep bounded frantically across the grass. At the distant end shots still blasted the air. Dotting the entire length of the meadow, dead sheep huddled like wooly gray boulders on the grass.

There was a flicker of motion in the trees at the far end. Jackson saw the

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The gun in Cantrell's fist blasted deafeningly

whisk of a horse's tail. A shot blasted and he heard the shrill ugly sound of a bullet as it ripped through the air not far from his head. He drew his own gun but there was no time to fire. His enemy was gone.

Jackson wasted no time in pursuit. Nor did he worry about exposing himself. The sheep killers would not linger to snipe at him, they were dangerous only if he tried to follow, and if he did, he would surely run into an ambush.

He checked his horse and stood quietly looking down at the desolation in the meadow, counting the dead sheep. Forty of the animals were sprawled in the grass, blood staining the thick gray tangle of their wool. A few still struggled painfully on the ground.

The unwounded ones milled about in leaderless confusion.

Presently Jackson found the herder, a Mexican boy. He had been shot, apparently, as he sat unsuspecting in the grass. A double-barreled shotgun lay near by and one thin arm was stretched out towards it as though he had reached vainly for the weapon even as bullets cut him down.

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A HAIL broke into Jackson's absorption. He twisted in his saddle. Two riders had broken into the meadow, were jogging towards him. As they came closer, Jackson recognized them. They were Abe Weeks, cattleman, owner of the Flying W and his *segundo*, Sam Cantrell.

They rode up to Jackson and stopped. Weeks looked around him with open satisfaction in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "we heard shootin' but we didn't reckon somebody was obligin' enough to do this little job for us. Thanks, Jackson."

"Don't try to be funny," Jackson said. "Whoever did this, shot that kid down in cold blood. Took a shot at me, too, just before they pulled stakes and quit the flat." His eyes ranged over the two men with no pretense at friendliness. "If I were a lawman, Weeks, I'd be asking you two for a sniff at the barrels of your guns."

"But you ain't a lawman," Weeks snapped.

He was a short man with a thin, hungry face and lips pursed continuously as though he were about to whistle. His shadow, Cantrell, was a silent individual with a reputation as a gunman. He rarely talked.

Jackson turned from them and surveyed the meadow again.

"This is the kind of thing that's got to stop before the grazing leases are renewed," he said.

"I don't savvy you," Weeks blurted. "Are you for the sheepmen or for us?"

"The Government isn't for anybody," Jackson said. "There's a place for cattle and a place for sheep. You men have got to share this range."

"Share?" Weeks snapped. "You can't share with sheep! They spoil the grass and foul the water! Cattle won't drink where sheep have been. And there's no grass where sheep has grazed. The blasted, stinkin' woolies even eat the roots!"

"Because you've crowded them onto a tenth of the range they need. Give them room enough and they won't ruin the grass any more'n cattle."

"We've leased this land for years. What do you want us to do, give it up?"

"You've leased five thousand acres and grazed your cattle over twenty thousand," Jackson reminded him. "The Government didn't kick. But when you try to keep men out of land which ain't yours, which you don't even lease, you're getting too big for your britches, Weeks."

The cattleman turned away from him.

"You're a fool—or worse, a sheepman!" he raged. "Come on, Sam, there's no profit in talkin' to that lame-brain."

They spurred their horses out of the meadow. After a last glance around, Jackson set his horse in motion, too. He was headed for Chris Sullivan's Triple S Ranch. From there he could send a message to town for the sheriff.

Weeks and Cantrell were bound for the same place, but he let them ride ahead of him, not anxious for their company. When he rode into the ranch yard of the Triple S, they had already arrived, and there was a multitude of horses at the hitching rack and a crowd of cattlemen on the big verandah.

Old Chris Sullivan, the cattle king of this high Colorado country was there with his two sons, Robbie and Bert. The old man looked glum and tugged uneasily at his white mustache.

"I called this meeting like you asked, Jackson," he rumbled. "But I'm hobbled if I can see any sense to it."

"You can't go on fighting," Jackson said. "Sheep being killed, cattle being killed, men being killed—the Government says it's got to stop."

Bert, the elder Sullivan boy, a square-jawed replica of his father at nineteen, caught Jackson's elbow.

"I hear you've talked Will Potter into going 'round to the sheep camps and getting the Clayburnes and the others into coming over here for a palaver," he said accusingly.

THE government man returned the stare, steady-eyed.

"Will is a level-headed lad," Jackson

said. "I reckon he's about the only cattleman who understands this situation and wants to settle it. Yes, he's helping me. Anything wrong with that?"

"You're shouting right there is," Bert Sullivan said. "Will Potter's the best friend I've got. It's bad enough my own brother, Robbie, is weak in the head over Clayburne's gal. I ain't going to stand by and see you turn Will against us!"

"Shut up, Bert!" Robbie said heatedly.

He was a year younger than Bert Sullivan, an earnest, black-haired youth, good looking, and with a sensitive mouth.

"Nobody's going to shut me up," Bert Sullivan said belligerently.

Jackson dropped his hands helplessly.

"I don't know," he said. "All I can say is that this fighting had better stop or you folks'll find yourselves headed for a range

war and the governor'll send soldiers in. And I won't renew your leases."

"You'll renew them," Abe Weeks said from the fringe of the circle. "Washington is a long way off, but I reckon Senator Barton can still be reached by telegraph. He's a cattleman, Jackson, and he swings a big club in Washington. You'll renew the leases or you'll be herding sheep at forty a month."

"Now that," said Jackson softly, "sounded like a threat, Abe, and if there's one thing I don't like its threats."

He moved so fast that Weeks had barely time to drop a hand to his gun butt. Jackson's left hand clamped over gun and fingers, locking them so that Weeks couldn't draw. Jackson's right fist bounced off Weeks' chin. The little man staggered back and sat down on the porch floor with a thump. Dazed, but furious, he yanked his gun.

Jackson's long leg swept out and up. His boot toe caught Weeks' wrist and sent the gun flying. At the same moment, he yanked his own six-gun and leveled it on Cantrell's middle. The *segundo* froze, his gun half out.

Jackson kept his eyes on Cantrell, but he spoke to the ring of cattlemen.

"Is there anyone else here who thinks I can be bluffed—or scared—into taking orders?"

"Put your gun up, Jackson," old Sullivan rumbled. "Nobody's trying to crowd you. Weeks is a hothead, he spoke out of turn. We all came here when you asked, didn't we?"

"There's one thing we better get straight," Jackson said, holstering his gun. He was angry. His straight brows were drawn down and made two furrows between them above his nose. "You men have been using free land for so many years that you think it's yours. It's not. Sheep—or nesters—have as much legal right here as you have and the Government is not going to see you killing sheep and driving men off land that's public domain!"

His voice carried out over the group of men who watched him stolidly. There was nothing in their eyes but naked hostility. In truth, they had used this land so long they truly believed it was theirs. In the government man they saw only one who was leagued with the sheepmen to take it from them.

Jackson turned away and went to the edge of the porch. He heard Weeks climb to his feet behind him but paid no attention. His eyes lifted to the trail which climbed the near by hills. The sheepmen should be coming, if Will Potter had done his job.

A rider came over the skyline. None followed. As he rode closer they saw he was a cowboy and he carried something over his saddle bows. He rode into the yard and slid a man's limp figure into waiting arms.

"Who is it?" Chris Sullivan called.

"Will Potter," said the rider. "I found him up near Clayburne's meadow. He's been shot with a .30-30. And there was forty dead sheep layin' around him."

CHAPTER II

Bushwacker Lead

JUMBLED impressions fought for ascendency in Mart Jackson's mind. He was thinking—Will Potter, the killer of those Clayburne sheep! Impossible! He hadn't seen the man who had thrown that hasty shot at him as he'd vanished in the trees, but it wasn't Will Potter. The youngster had been one of the few men on Wapiti Range who understood, as Jackson did, the danger of this suicide feud between cattle and sheep. He'd wanted to help Jackson stop it.

It was unthinkable that he had slaughtered the woolies on the mountain, equally unthinkable that Clayburne or one of his herders would have gulched him.

Yet on the porch behind him he heard the outraged oaths of the cattlemen, heard Abe Weeks' voice raised shrilly. Then abruptly there was silence. He turned.

Bert Sullivan was coming out of the house, saddle carbine in his hand. He headed for the steps. Jackson stepped in front of him.

"Where you going, Bert?"

The youngster put out his hand. "Stand aside, Jackson. Will Potter was my best friend."

"He was a friend of mine, too," Jackson said. "Where you going?"

"To get Clayburne!"

"Bert!" Robbie Sullivan flung himself in front of his brother. "You can't kill Irene's father. There's been some mistake! Bert, listen to me!"

Bert Sullivan hit him—a solid right-hand smash. Robbie went off the steps backward and slammed into the dust with a bone-jarring smash.

"Don't try to stop me, Jackson," Bert Sullivan said, swinging his rifle barrel up slightly.

He went down the steps and out to his horse.

Jackson helped Robbie to his feet. "Let him go, son," he said. "Nobody can stop him right now."

The cattlemen came down off the porch and split up, heading for their horses. Chris Sullivan stood there alone, tugging morosely at his white mustache. He looked down at Jackson and Robbie, standing alone.

"Reckon that's the end of your peace move," he said glumly. "We'll be swapping lead, not words."

Jackson found nothing to say. He got his horse, swung into saddle and turned towards town. He'd failed, and it would be open war between cattlemen and sheepmen and no man could say where it would end.

The sheriff of Elkhorn County was Two-ton Bromley, a man so fat that his horses had to be carefully picked for size and strength, but he was a good officer and a dead shot. He listened gloomily to Jackson's crisp summary of the situation.

"This is cattle country, Mart," he said. "Always has been. Cattlemen came in here, fought Injuns and blizzards and drought and grizzlies and made the country what it is. Can't say I blame them for not wanting to hand it over to the woolies."

"They don't have to hand it over," Jackson said impatiently. "Great balls of fire! Can't I make anyone understand that there's room for both if they only use their heads and establish a deadline? The cattlemen want all or nothing. Anyway, Two-ton, you better round up some deputies and get out there and see if you can stop this range war before it busts around our ears."

WHEN Bromley had gone, Jackson stabled his horse and went down the street to the tiny restaurant for his supper. He was dawdling over steak and potatoes when the door slapped open and a girl came in. She threw a quick glance around and headed for Jackson's table.

Irene Clayburne was slim and pretty, with brown hair brushed back neatly from her small ears and clear gray eyes. She wore a man's shirt and bibbed overalls with serviceable flat heeled shoes on

her feet, yet in spite of this sheepman's garb she managed to look pretty.

She came up to Jackson's table as the government man struggled to his feet.

"Mart, I've been looking for you."

He had a moment's dread.

"Something wrong, Irene?"

"Why no." She gave him a puzzled glance. "I just wanted to tell you I've been working on Dad and the others and I've got them to the point where they're willing to talk to the cowmen. What a job that was!" She flopped into a chair.

"Didn't—didn't Will Potter come to see you?" Jackson asked.

"No. Was he supposed to?"

"I sent him. He was drygulched before he got to your camp. Drygulched in a meadow where there are forty dead Clayburne sheep."

"Bert Sullivan's been killed! Robbie found him!"

The girl uttered a little cry. She stepped out into the dusty street and raised her arms toward Robbie Sullivan.

"Robbie, I'm sorry," she said.

The boy turned a white, strained face towards her. His eyes were glazed with grief, almost unseeing. His voice was husky, strained.

"You're sorry," he said. "I'm sorry—everybody's sorry. It's too late. Save your grief, Irene. It's the Sullivans against the Clayburnes now and I'm a Sullivan!"

His face worked as though he were fighting tears. Abruptly he wrenched his horse violently around and galloped up the street. Irene Clayburne stood in the boiling dust, her arms still half raised.

Jackson pulled her back to the board-

Sagebrush Sam Says:

Hard work and ridin' a good hoss has got this in common. They won't get you nowheres, without you know where you're headin' afore you start.

The girl's cheeks went white. "Will did that?"

"No. Somebody killed him and left him there to make folks believe he was shooting sheep and a Clayburne man got him. Fact, I don't even think Will was killed there, because I was in that meadow right after the sheep killing and he wasn't around then. I think some hombre brought him there after he was dead."

The girl got out of her chair again.

"I'd better go back, Mart. There'll be trouble and I've got to warn Dad."

"I'll go with you."

Out on the boardwalk they paused as a small cavalcade of riders thundered down upon them. Two-ton Bromley's vast bulk and giant horse dominated the roadway. Behind him rode Robbie Sullivan and Bromley's deputies. They pulled up in a swirl of dust. Bromley shouted out,

walk, his arm around her waist. She clung to him and he felt the first sobbing shudders begin to tear through her slim body. Over her head, conscious even in that moment of the perfume of her hair in his nostrils, he spoke to Bromley.

"I'll take Irene home, Two-ton, and try to talk sense to Clayburne. You swear in every man you can get and burn leather after us. And hustle—if you want to stop a full-sized range war. The devil is loose with his pitchfork."

Moments later, Irene and Jackson were pounding out of town toward the sheep range of the Clayburnes. The girl had fought and conquered her tears. She was still-faced and quiet now, with only a faint smudge across one cheek, which she had hastily wiped with a dusty hand. Only once during that frantic ride, did she refer to what had happened.

"Mart, you—you heard Robbie. Does that mean he's—through with me?"

So now he was giving advice to the lovelorn! Ah, but they were such good kids, Robbie and Irene, solid youngsters, honestly in love. What a pity the whole business was. Lives thrown away, lives ruined, because men were too stubborn or too stupid to sit down together and talk their problems over.

"No, Irene," Jackson told her. "I don't think Robbie meant he was through with you. He meant that he can no longer stay out of the fight honorably. He tried to keep Bert from going after your dad and was knocked down for it. Now Bert's been killed—well, it's like he said, the Sullivans against the Clayburnes, and he's got to fight or be called yellow."

"But my dad didn't kill Bert—he couldn't have!"

"I hope we can prove that to Chris Sullivan before the shooting starts."

Their horses were blown and flecked with lather by the time they galloped out into the pine-ringed meadow that held the Clayburne sheep camp. There were wagons here, covered wagons whose canvas tops were white against the dark green of the pines, and a "caravan," a wooden-sided wagon with doors and windows which was a houseboat on wheels. There were sheep in the meadow and fuzzy, crying lambs which bounded erratically in all directions and bleated in thin little voices.

BUT none of these things caught their attention. For just in front of the group of wagons was a struggling knot of men and horses. Jackson saw old Chris Sullivan and Robbie and with them Abe Weeks and Sam Cantrell and cowboys from both the Triple S and Flying W Ranches. Some were mounted and one held a rope with open loop. On the ground, Cantrell and several cowboys wrestled with a tall man dressed in the overalls and flat-heeled boots which stamped him a sheepman.

Jackson could see a woman there too, a faded and older Irene. She struggled silently but fiercely in the grip of the burly Cantrell until he threw her flat with a vicious shove. The next instant the rope in the hands of the cowboy darted out and dropped over Clayburne's head.

The noise and confusion of the struggle kept the men from seeing Irene and Jackson as they approached. The girl uttered a little cry as she saw her father fighting the lynch law gang and clapped heels to her mount. The government man did the only reasonable thing. He yanked his six-gun and loosed a shot into the air.

At the crash of the gun every man in the group whipped his head around. Jackson pulled rein at the edge of the crowd, his gun weaving back and forth to cover all of them.

"Stand hitched!" he ordered. "Take that rope off Clayburne's neck!"

"It's that government renegade!" Weeks howled. "Sam—Lefty—get that polecat!"

Jackson's gun roared. A Flying W cowboy cried out in pain and went down while Jackson's gun swung instantly to center on Cantrell.

"Go ahead and try it," he invited.

The Flying W *segundo* checked himself, his fingertips grazing his gun butts. He waited, eyes burning into Jackson's.

Irene, meanwhile, had flung herself from her horse and plunged into the crowd of men, fists and elbows flailing. She reached her father's side, yanked off the noose and hurried him out of the ring of captors. Mrs. Clayburne had picked herself up, and the girl led both her parents to one side.

"Spread out, boys," Abe Weeks ordered. "Sam, you, me and Chris, we'll all go for our guns at once. Let's see which one of us Mister Jackson wants to kill before the other two cut his liver out!"

"Got you, Boss," Cantrell rasped.

"Now wait, Abe," old Chris protested. "This ain't like stringing up a murdering sheepman. Jackson's a government man."

"He's running with the sheepmen!" Weeks shouted. "Robbie, are you letting your brother's killer slip through our fingers?"

The youngster's face was drained of

color. He was caught between the millstones of forces too great for him. His eyes moved from Weeks to Jackson and indecision, like pain, was written across his face.

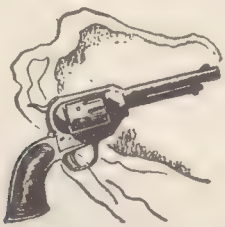
Irene came back into this deadlock with a .30-30 rifle. She pointed it at the tight little knot of cattlemen and spoke four words.

"Get out of here."

"Hold your ground!" Weeks roared. "Men, with the Sullivans or without 'em, we're takin' Clayburne. You hear, Jackson? When I give the word go for your guns!"

The logical thing to do, Jackson realized, would be to cut down on Weeks at once and eliminate the spur that was driving the men to start shooting. But that might precipitate the very gun battle he was striving to avoid. He did not want to start the ball rolling.

Weeks' hand inched downward towards his gun butt. His mouth opened to give the signal. And into that tight moment



came the thunder of many hoofs. Two-ton Bromley and a posse surged over the skyline and roared down upon the sheep camp. The force of law and order had arrived.

The lawmen rode in between the cattlemen and their victims. From the height where he towered over all of them, Bromley roared his orders.

"There'll be no lynchings or shootings in this county long's I'm sheriff! Break it up, men! Get back!"

Jackson put his gun away and wiped clammy sweat off his face. He saw Irene lower her rifle and hurry back to her mother. Clayburne stood near the steps of the caravan. The cowboys drew off a bit and held their ground.

"Sullivan!" Bromley roared. "Are you making a formal charge of murder against Clayburne?"

"I am," old Chris replied. "Bert was bushwhacked on this land."

"That's not evidence," Bromley replied. "I'll want a coroner's jury and an investigation before charges can be brought. That's the way I want it."

"And I suppose," Weeks shouted angrily, "that means Clayburne goes free?"

"It does."

"There you are," Weeks said, waving his arm violently at the cowmen. "That's our law. The cattlemen pay the sheriff's salary, pay the taxes for the county, and that's the protection we get. Does that prove we got to take the law into our own hands? Bromley, this a cow country—don't forget it. You ain't going to need a coroner's jury!"

Jackson lifted his voice. He spoke for himself now.

"Weeks, it's time someone called your bluff. You've been sounding off, trying your best to make trouble and keep trouble boiling. You've stirred up necktie parties, bad feelings when more level heads than yours were trying to make peace. Now I'm calling you. Make your play or shut your mouth."

The blunt challenge flung down in the middle of the group brought a bristling silence. Weeks, Jackson knew, did not lack courage. His decision to fight a moment before, even though he knew the first bullet very likely had his name on it, showed that. Now the hot rage poured up into his cheeks and his hand made an involuntary twitch. Then he checked himself as though he had thought of something. His eyes flicked towards his silent, watching shadow, Cantrell and back to Jackson.

"I'll take your call, Jackson," he said. "But when I'm ready. I got things to do first that are more important. And one of those things is seein' that Senator Barton gets busy in Washington. You're goin' to be busted, Jackson, before the month is up!"

Weeks played his ace.

CHAPTER III

Death in the Dark

LATER, Jackson found Irene sitting on the steps of the caravan with her face in her hands. At his approach she lifted her head to reveal a woebegone, tear-stained face. Reaction and shock had claimed her now that the actual crisis was past.

"He went away," she said brokenly. "He went away without a word or a look!"

"Robbie?" Jackson rolled a cigarette thoughtfully. "The kid's caught in a stampede, and it's ride or be trampled. He'll be all right when this is over."

She dried her eyes, tried to smile.

"What happens to our plan to get the cowmen and sheepmen together?"

"Poorer'n Job's turkey right now," Jackson said. "All the same I'm not going to renew those grazing leases until they make a deadline and stop fighting."

"They'll graze their cattle without leases and Weeks will get that senator to have you recalled."

Jackson shrugged. "Then I'll make my report to Washington and we'll see. I think Weeks is climbing Fool's Hill in a hurry. He can't get away with this, he's not fighting Injuns."

A lamb tugged at Jackson's chaps and bleated mournfully.

"He's hungry," Irene said. "His mother was one of those that were shot."

She went into the caravan and came out with a bottle of milk, with nipple attached. The lamb seized it and began sucking noisily.

The elder Clayburne approached.

"I'll say thanks, Mart," he said to Jackson. "You didn't get here any too soon. What's to be done now?"

"Start all over again," Jackson said. "Chris Sullivan is the most influential cowman in the country. I'm not giving up hope of convincing him."

"With Bert dead? You can't do it, Mar." He shook his head.

"There's nothing else to do."

"And meanwhile," Clayburne said darkly, "sheep will be killed and herders bushwhacked. Mart, we're not going to take it laying down. The sheepmen are goin' to fight back!"

Those words echoed dismally in Jackson's mind as he rode away. His one ace so far had been his ability to restrain the sheepmen, if not the cowmen. With lead flying from both sides the fat was in the fire for sure.

Two days later a flock of sheep was stampeded south of Clayburne's range, twenty-seven were killed and a herder wounded. The next day a Clayburne herder was ambushed and fourteen sheep killed before help arrived. The sheepherder was seriously hurt and expected to die.

These reports came to a melancholy Jackson and a morose Bromley. Two-ton had lost weight and had run four horses ragged in his attempt to keep up with the smoldering range war which broke out here and there and threatened at any moment to leap into full flame.

"You're from the Government," Bromley complained to Jackson. "Whyn't you do something?"

"Like what?" Jackson replied sourly.

HE STEPPED out of Bromley's office into a cold, clear night. There was a keen wind moving down from Wapiti Range and the stars seemed big and near. The town was quiet and the street deserted. Tension had accumulated in Elkhorn until it hung over the country like a pall. There was a brooding, throbbing quiet that was not peace, but only the prelude to violence.

Jackson went down the street to his office where he bunked on a cot in back and went to bed. He was a healthy man and in spite of his troubles, he dropped off and slept easily.

Some indeterminate time later he came upright in alarm. There was a steady tapping at the side window. He reached for his six-gun on the chair at the side of the

cot, then moved to the window. It was open a few inches from the bottom and he whispered through the aperture.

"Who is it?"

"Robbie Sullivan! I've got to talk to you."

Jackson let him in.

"Don't light a lamp," Robbie said in an urgent whisper. He began to stride up and down in the dark. "Mart, I can't stand this no more. Dad has gone off his head since Bert was killed and Weeks—you know how he's been. They're going to clean out Clayburne for good."

Jackson was busy pulling on his levis and boots. "Where are they?" he asked.

"At our ranch. They're crazy, Mart. They're talking about killing the sheep and burning the wagons. They're liable to hurt Irene!"

"All right, kid." Jackson stood up, buckling on his gun-belt. "You did right coming here. Now you pound leather for the Clayburnes'. Warn them to get their sheep out of the valley and scatter 'em in the hills. Move the wagons—hide 'em. Weeks will track them, of course, but it'll hold them up, give us time. Now ride!"

"Where you going to be, Mart?"

"I'll stop and tell the sheriff, then I'll head for the Triple S and see if I can stop your dad before he gets started. There's just a chance I can."

"Not tonight," Robbie said, shaking his head. "He's been brooding over Bert."

He slipped out and disappeared in the dark.

Jackson got his hat and went for his horse. Surprisingly, he felt something much like relief as he headed into the hills after warning Bromley. The showdown was here, and at least he knew what must be done. The worst of it was always the waiting for something to happen. That was over. He could forget he was an official of the Department of the Interior. He was Mart Jackson again, a range rider who could throw lead with the best of them. Perhaps the time had come when Weeks and Cantrell were ready to call his bluff.

He smiled tightly in the dark, fingering the deputy sheriff badge which Bromley had pressed upon him.

It was still full black, though the smell of dawn was in the air when he reached the Triple S. He left his horse and went forward cautiously on foot. The big ranchhouse was dark, but there was a flickering light in the barn and he turned in that direction. A horse snorted in the darkness and stamped. Jackson made out the shape of a spring wagon to which two horses were hitched. He went forward and ran his hand over the bed.

There were kegs and wads of cotton tow and axes stacked in the wagon. Carefully he pulled the cork from a keg and bent his nostrils to it. The rank smell of kerosene came up. So it was to be lead and fire, as Robbie had said.

He paused in the open double doors of the barn. A lantern burned on the floor and beside it stood Abe Weeks, drawing lines in the dust with a stick. Silent Cantrell was close beside him, as always, and in a ring around them, the cowboys of the Triple S and the Flying W and the Rocking H and the other ranches of Elkhorn county.

"Am I interrupting?" Jackson drawled.

EVERY head twisted in his direction. For a moment, Weeks was frozen over his stick, then a tight little grin moved across his face.

"It's the government man," he said softly. "You're just in time, Jackson, just in time to see this range go back to cows where it belongs."

Jackson shook his head.

"No, you've got that wrong. I'm here to tell you to quit, Weeks, or to take up that invitation where you dropped it last time."

Weeks darted a glance sideways at Cantrell.

"Is that so?" he rasped. "Well, now, maybe you're plumb right. Maybe the time has come."

His hand flashed downward and smoothly. Like another part of the same well-oiled machine, Sam Cantrell's arm swept in an arc for his gun. Jackson was mov-

ing with them. Even in that infinitesimal part of a second, he had picked his mark. It would be suicide to shoot at either man, for the remaining one would get him. He shot, instead, at the lantern on the floor and saw it fly into a million pieces as he threw himself flat and felt slugs hammer over his head.

Darkness swooped over the barn as the lantern smashed, but orange streaks of flame stabbed the gloom, giving weird, fragmentary pictures of men shooting, darting forward doubled over. Jackson rolled frantically out of the doorway and the line of fire, holding his own shots.

Then he realized suddenly, that they were between him and the door, his retreat was cut off. At the same moment there was a strange leaping flow in the air and figures began to materialize out of the gloom. Little tongues of flame were running along the barn floor, where the spilled kerosene had caught fire.

"There he is!"

A shot roared, close to him. Jackson got to his feet and instantly flying figures struck him. He was knocked off balance and went down while fierce hands clawed and struck at him and feet pounded as the others rushed up and flung themselves into the fight.

Something heavy crashed on his head, and at the sickening jolt of pain the entire barn, with its little leaping flames swung crazily. Strength went out of his limbs and left them like water. He was dragged to his feet and his arms pinioned. While some of the men hastily stamped out the flames which were crawling toward the hay, Jackson was trussed up against one of the upright wooden pillars which supported the high arched roof of the barn.

As his eyes cleared, he saw the men trooping hastily out the door. Abe Weeks stopped before him and tested the ropes.

"You'll hold," he grunted. "Thank your lucky star, Jackson, you're alive. We ain't anxious to kill you. But you're through on Wapiti Range. When we come back from cleaning out that nest of sheepers you're getting out of this country."

Jackson's eyes met those of old Chris Sullivan. The old rancher looked troubled and morose. Grief and rage had burned harsh lines in his face and aged him visibly in the short week that had passed. He said nothing and in a moment he and Weeks followed the men out, and Jackson was left alone. Shortly Jackson heard the soft clop of many hoofs, and soon they faded away and were gone. He was left in the darkness of the big old barn.

The sweetness of hay was in his nostrils and the rich mealiness of oats and grain dust—all the familiar, nostalgic smells of a barn. After a while there were small scurrying sounds as the rats emerged from their hiding places. The door was partly open and through it he could see the night sky and the bright glitter of the stars.

High up near the roof, a soundless shadow blotted out the stars for a second and he knew that a barn owl, disturbed by the men, had come home. A second later a rat squealed sharply and there was a tiny scuffle. The owl had found hunting.

Methodically, Jackson tested the ropes which held him to the pillar and found them firm. There would be no wriggling loose. He leaned against the roughness of the wood and tried to straighten out his thoughts.

So he'd failed. He was not a lawman, in spite of the deputy's badge Two-ton Bromley had given him, and his job was not to enforce the peace. His job was to renew grazing leases. Yet if open and bloody war broke out between cowmen and sheepmen, everything for which he had worked would be gone in powder-smoke.

IT WAS best for all that sheep and cattle be given a fair share of grass and water, for each had its part and none could say which was the more important. The Government wanted it so, and Martin Jackson, limited though his powers were, was the only government representative here in Colorado Territory. His responsibility, he felt, went far beyond the clerical business of issuing leases.

He'd failed. Now the Interior Depart-

ment, learning that peace was not to be, might find its whole program of public land use and conservation damaged by a reckless, selfish war of men who could not, or would not, use reason. He stood in the darkness of the barn and sought for a solution and found none.

The barn door creaked. The dim bulk of a man slid between Jackson and the stars.

"Who is it?" Jackson asked. "You can quit crawlin', I'm tied!"

"Sh-h-h, it's Cookie."

"Sullivan's cook?"

"Yep."

He felt rather than saw the man materialize before him and an exploring hand came out of the dark and touched his face.

"The old man passed me the word to turn you loose when they were a good piece gone," Cookie breathed. His fingers found the bound wrists and a knife sawed at the ropes. "What's that?" he whispered sharply.

A soft sound had come from outside, a sound so vague neither of them could identify it. Cookie's knife stopped its motion.

Startlingly, a match flared near them. The flame gouged a hole in the blackness, beat down on a man's sombrero, a shadowed face. With a sickening drop of the heart, Jackson made out Cantrell's sullen, craggy features.

The gunman held the match high. A sixgun gleamed in his fist. Beside Jackson, Cookie loosed a gasp, made an involuntary move. It had been a move of fright, of escape. But the gun in Cantrell's fist blasted deafeningly in their faces. Cookie's face twisted in shock and amazement. The knife slid from his fingers, he bent at the middle and crumpled to the floor.

As Cantrell's eyes followed him down, Mart Jackson threw all his strength against the half-cut ropes. They snapped, just as the match in Cantrell's fingers went out and the darkness clamped down again.

Jackson went down, down in a flat dive at the gunman's ankles. Cantrell's weapon roared again. He had not seen Jackson's movement and needed no light for the point-blank shot at such close range. But the lurid flare of muzzle flame split the darkness and showed him an empty pillar just as the government man's plunging body snapped his feet out from under him and they went rolling over the hay-strewn boards.

Jackson heard the thump of the heavy six-gun striking wood and the scuffle of Cantrell's boots. Then silence. He lay with his cheek against the boards, with strands of hay tickling his face, and wondered if Cantrell still had his gun or had dropped it.

If he had it, he would feel safe, he'd be moving. His silence was eloquent indication that he did not know where the gun was. But the one who moved now would betray his position to the other.

Jackson put out a hand cautiously and moved it in a semicircle before him. He touched nothing. There was the faintest rasp ahead somewhere—Cantrell was moving. Jackson heard the dragging whisper of his clothes over the floor. He was searching for the gun.

Perhaps it was best to find and jump him now. Since neither had the gun it would be at least an equal bare-handed struggle. Jackson began to draw his legs up under him. Then Cantrell took a chance. For the second time, a match flared.

In the sudden light, Jackson saw the gunman crouched on his knees a few feet away. He saw the dull shine of the six-gun to Cantrell's right. Too far!

The gunman lunged for his weapon. Jackson kicked out with his long legs like a frog in an effort to throw himself on Cantrell's back. He fell over Cookie's body. He saw Cantrell scoop up the gun triumphantly. Then the match went out. In the same instant, Jackson felt the nick of Cookie's knife against his hand.

It was a butcher knife from the kitchen, a heavy, long-bladed tool. He found the handle, his fingers closed on it and he rolled frantically away from the spot.

FLAME lanced the darkness again, and the deafening roar of the shot boomed in the barn as in a cave. Jackson saw Cantrell's dim form outlined behind the orange flare and knew that it was now or never. He leaped and slashed down savagely with the knife.

Cantrell had sensed his coming and tried to dodge. The knife missed, but their bodies crashed together and sprawled flat again. Jackson was on top and from their position he knew where Cantrell's right arm should be. His left hand found the gun wrist as it was rising from the floor. He slammed it back and put his knee on it.

His freed left hand flashed to Cantrell's face, heeled his chin back while he put the knife point where it would bite lightly into the gunman's throat.

"Rest easy," he panted, "or I'll pin you to the floor!"

Cantrell's muscles relaxed. Jackson let the knife dig in slightly while with his left hand he fumbled in his vest and produced a match. He scratched it on the floor and held it over Cantrell's face.

"All right, talk!" he said.

Cantrell's eyes gleamed up at him with their sullen defiance unbroken. He said nothing, just matched his stare against Jackson's.

The knife point went in deeper and a little red stain appeared and began to trace a thin line downward.

"What do you want to know?" Cantrell choked out.

"Why'd you come back? Just to kill me?"

He saw assent in the gunman's eyes.

"Why?"

"Weeks planned it. He wanted you found dead here so Sullivan would be blamed, mebbe arrested. With Bert an' Robbie out of the way—" He left the rest unsaid, nor did he need to say any more.

For the first time Jackson saw what he should have seen from the beginning. Weeks, not the sheepherders, had gulched Bert Sullivan. Weeks had undoubtedly killed Will Potter, too—Jackson had been sure the sheepmen wouldn't have done it when Potter came as a hope for peace. Then Weeks had thought he could rid himself of Jackson by murder, and of Sullivan by pinning the blame on him, and that would leave only young Robbie. The way would be clear for Weeks to gain control of the whole rich Wapiti Range.

So this, at last, was the answer to Abe Weeks' persistent stirring up of trouble, his fierce demands for war.

The match burned his fingers and, startled, he dropped it. In that brief second of preoccupation, Cantrell acted. His body surged up under Jackson as he threw all his energy into a lunge to rip his gun arm out from under the confining knee.

Jackson felt the gun arm tear itself free from under him. But the move unbalanced him. Without intention on his part he slipped, and all his weight came down on his knife arm.

He felt the blade go in sickeningly and crunch against the wooden floor.

After a moment Jackson pushed himself away and crouched in the darkness. His stomach churned in nausea, but he fought it down, found another match and struck it. He had kept his promise. Cantrell was pinned to the floor.

CHAPTER IV

Showdown in Lead

THE keen dawn wind off Elk Mountain blew the last sickness out of Jackson as Cantrell's horse carried him up into sheep country. He had paused for nothing but to see that Cookie was beyond help, to snatch up Cantrell's six-gun and find Cantrell's horse, before starting on the cooling trail of the cowmen. Now, two hours up on the wooded benches of Clayburne's sheep range, he had lost the trail in the darkness and was heading as straight as he could toward the spot where the sheep camp had stood.

The east was growing lighter, and the

pointed, stiff tops of the pines were coming into silhouette like irregular teeth in a giant's mouth. A cottontail fled in panic before the sound of his horse's hoofs. Birds ringed him in a circle of melody which traveled with him as he rode.

The sun was pushing its first fiery fingers over the pines as he came into Clayburne's meadow, and his nose told him before his eyes that the cattlemen had been here. A pungent, gagging smoke was on the breeze as he came in. Among the meadow birches he saw the cause.

A pile of ashes and smoldering timber ends marked the spot where the caravan and the canvas-topped wagon had stood. Mules lay dead in their harness. Around the meadow, like pathetic bunches of wool, were the bodies of ewes and lambs that had been held in this small meadow for feeding.

His horse shied and rolled his eyes wildly at the smell of blood. He was so nervous that Jackson tied him to a tree before getting down. Then, with heavy foreboding, he searched the ruins of the wagons for human bodies. There were none here, at least. Apparently whoever had been here had had time to get out, leaving only the wagons and animals for the punchers to vent their wrath upon.

Jackson got back into the saddle and headed over the ridge for the valley beyond. This was the grazing range proper and the place he had sent Robbie with instructions to move the flocks.

Apparently Robbie had delivered his message, for when Jackson topped the brushy ridge he looked down upon a vast tilted meadowland bare of sheep. But on the edge of the trees he saw horses and the tiny figures of men, some grounded, some mounted. He had caught up with the cattlemen.

They had stopped, either to rest or to discuss their next move, but Jackson wasted no time watching them. He put his horse in motion again and began to pick his way around the meadow so as to get ahead of them and still remain out of sight.

The ridge he was following sloped down into the pines and here he could run his mount. There was no sound of hoofs on the soft mat of dry needles. He bent low in the saddle to avoid the dead branches which stuck out straight from the resinous trunks like spears.

WHEN he started to climb again on the far side of the meadow, he looked back. The cattlemen were mounting, getting ready to move. But they were behind him now.

Jackson came into the notch between the mountains and struck the trail of the sheep. The earth had been churned into a muddy highway by thousands of sharp little hoofs, making a trail no one could miss. Only if Clayburne and the other sheepmen had time to get their flocks clear off Wapiti Range could a slaughter be avoided.

The trail climbed into a world of rocky boulders and twisted, leaning trees. Here on the top of the world the wind came fresh and strong and the brim of Jackson's sombrero flapped like a sail. He was urging his horse along recklessly, not watching too closely and was taken completely by surprise when two men with rifles stepped out in the trail.

Jackson pulled his horse in. They were sheepmen and there was nothing friendly about their faces or the way in which they held their rifles. He glanced behind him and saw a third man blocking his retreat from behind a boulder.

"Hey!" he protested. "I'm Mart Jackson. Where's Clayburne?"

"He's here," said one of the riflemen. "Get down."

"Now wait a minute," Jackson said hurriedly. "I'm a government man."

"I don't care who you are!" the sheepman spat. "You look like a cowboy to me!"

"I tell you Clayburne knows me."

"We'll take you to Clayburne and let him speak for you. Get down!"

Jackson slid off his horse. The man in back of him moved up and with his rifle barrel prodded him into motion. They took him off the trail, one leading his

horse, and into the rocks. Then he saw what he had ridden into.

The sheepmen had prepared an ambush. They had brought their flocks through here and sent them on with the boys and women. Then, every man capable of holding a rifle had backtracked to this spot where the boulders made a natural fort and here they had laid a trap for the cattlemen.

The pursuers would be following the sheep tracks, confident that sheep and men were running as hard as they could. Whipped up by Abe Weeks' frenzy they would know no caution. They would run into this ambush, and hidden rifles would cut them down like grain. There'd be no chance.

Looking around, Jackson saw how little chance they would have. Every rock sheltered a grim-faced rifleman in sheepherder's overalls. Cartridges were laid out ready to hand, rifles were poised on stone rests. Each man there knew it was kill or be killed. They were ready.

Clayburne came striding to meet them. He was bare-headed as was his custom, and his face was pale with strain, but grim-lipped and unyielding. He, too, carried a rifle.

"Clayburne, you can't do this!" Jackson burst out. "It's murder!"

"Is it?" the sheepman said. "Wasn't it murder when the cowmen gulched our herders, shot down our sheep, burned our wagons?"

"But listen—the whole trouble's been caused by Abe Weeks. I got the story out of his gunman, Cantrell."

"Will they listen to you?" Clayburne asked bitterly. "Jackson, you saved my life, and I'm beholden to you. But stay out of this, for your own sake. I can't stop these men and I wouldn't try. It's their lives or the cattlemen's."

"But this is a massacre!"

"And what would it be if we let them catch us and our sheep?" He turned to Jackson's guards. "Bring him back out of harm's way." Then he was off, striding among the boulders to take his place with his men.

Jackson's guards urged him toward the rear of the ambush. One took his six-gun. They climbed part way up one of the side hills and in a grassy spot closely surrounded by boulders the size of a house they came to a stop. Irene Clayburne was there and Robbie Sullivan. The boy was lying on his back, tied hand and foot, and the girl sat glumly by his side, her face a picture of misery.

"So," Jackson said softly. "That's your reward for coming and warning them?"

"He'll take no harm," one of his guards said. "But we won't have him warning the cowboys. His father's with them."

Jackson sat down on the grass near the youngsters. Two of his guards went back, one remained, lounging against a boulder with his rifle in the crook of his arm.

Robbie's eyes flashed. "They're gulchin' my dad—and his men?" he asked.

Jackson nodded.

"I didn't think that's what would happen, when I warned them," the boy said miserably. "If Dad's hurt, it'll be my doing."

JACKSON looked at the girl interrogatively.

"I promised Father I wouldn't untie him," she said unhappily. "Otherwise, he'd have sent me on with the others."

"You wouldn't break your promise, of course," Jackson said, stretching out on his back.

"No," she whispered, head low.

"There are times," the government man said, "when breaking a promise, or telling a lie, might stop something worse than the lie. Wouldn't you say it was justified then?"

His left hand, shielded from sight of the guard by his body, slid a jackknife from his pocket. Under the pressure of his thumb, the blade snicked open.

"I don't know," the girl said. Her head was still low and she did not see what Jackson was doing.

Robbie's face came alive as he felt the pressure of the knife edge against the cords.

"Sure now," Jackson pursued. "Good

and evil are words which are mighty interchangeable, it seems to me. Sometimes doing what you think is good brings about some mighty bad results. And sometimes you've got to act plumb ornery to get some good done."

The guard spat disgustedly and turned his head away from them to crane down into the pass at the backs of his fellows and see if anything was happening. He heard the first ringing clash of steel-shod hoofs on rocks far below and stretched his neck to look further. The cattlemen were not yet in sight among the trees, and he turned an excited face toward the prisoners and the girl.

"They're coming—" he started and his voice died away in astonishment. Robbie Sullivan was sitting up, his hands free.

"Hey!" said the guard and leaped forward. His orders were not to shoot, and this placed him at a disadvantage. For as his legs came up to Jackson's reclining form, the government man gathered in his ankles and cut him down.

They swarmed over him as he hit the ground. Jackson wrenched the rifle away.

"Run for the timber!" he ordered Robbie. Then he pointed the muzzle of the rifle to the sky and pulled trigger.

The report boomed and echoed among the rocks, flinging itself back and forth until it sounded like the multiple shots of a hundred guns. There was an excited shout far below, and faintly Jackson heard Chris Sullivan's bellow.

"Hunt cover! It's an ambush!"

A roar went up from the sheepmen and rifles began to crack. Jackson flipped his hand at Irene, sitting helplessly, and dashed after Robbie into the trees.

The fat was in the fire so far as war between the two factions was concerned. But this much Jackson had accomplished by his warning to the cowmen. He had averted a massacre which would have had the most serious consequences. Since both sides were not holed up in strong positions in the rocks, the result would probably be a stalemate, and perhaps serious loss of life could be avoided.

He ducked among rocks and tree trunks, working his way down lower and looking for Robbie. Once or twice he called, although his voice was lost in the erratic popping of guns which kept the echoes dancing. Robbie would probably head downhill to get back to his father where Jackson, too, wanted to go. Since the sheepmen no longer needed his help, there was some unfinished business he had with Abe Weeks.

He began to get nervous as he slid and clambered lower on the slope. He was now actually between the fighting forces, although to one side and still upon the side hill. As soon as the men began to outflank one another, however, they might run onto him and he would be considered an enemy by both sides.

Lead whined or screamed shrilly as it ricocheted off the rocks. Some of the men shouted taunts at one another. Then Jackson heard new voices, quieter, in the woods just ahead. He took off his som-

[*Turn page*]

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brero and inched his head cautiously around a fallen log.

ABE WEEKS was there. He was standing with his back to Jackson, his six-gun covering Robbie Sullivan. Sunlight filtered down through the pine branches to dapple their faces with light and shadow.

"It ain't enough to kill you," Weeks said. "I want you to know why."

"I know why," Robbie said. "'Cause you're a murdering polecat!"

"Brave, ain't you?" Weeks sneered. "Listen. I could have been the biggest rancher on Wapiti if your old man didn't beat me out. Well, I will be now. I got Bert and it was blamed on the sheepmen. I'll plug you and it'll be blamed on the sheepmen. By now Cantrell has taken care of that snoop Jackson in your barn, and that'll be blamed on your old man. That'll take the Sullivans and the sheepmen out of the way—and leave me boss of Wapiti Range."

"You're wrong, Weeks," Jackson said quietly behind him. "Cantrell didn't take care of me."

Abe Weeks swung, snarling like a puma. His six-gun chopped around in a deadly arc. Jackson pointed his rifle like a hand-gun and pulled the trigger.

Robbie gulped and began to breathe again. "Boy, am I glad to see you!" he said. He bent to pick up Weeks' pistol. "Now let's go find Dad."

With Robbie leading, they made their way into the cattlemen's lines without drawing fire. They found old Chris Sullivan. Jackson told his story.

"So you see," he concluded, "it was Weeks who killed Potter and Bert—Weeks or Cantrell. It's those two who have been stirring up this war. Now, Chris, are you going to let it go on—let more men be killed?"

The owner of the Triple S turned a haggard face on the government man.

"How can I stop it now?" he muttered.

"You got a white handkerchief in your pocket?" Jackson asked sardonically.

Old Chris stared at him a moment, his face like granite. Then he showed the courage of the Sullivans. He yanked a big white handkerchief from his hip pocket and tied it around the muzzle of his gun.

"You men!" he roared. "Stop firing!"

The cowboys' shooting died. Chris hoisted the rifle barrel and white flag above his rock. After a moment the sheepmen's fire stopped. "Well, here goes," Chris Sullivan muttered and heaved his big body upright in plain view.

THERE was an instant's dreadful tension. But no shots came from the sheepherders' rocks. Chris walked out into the middle of the trail. Jackson came behind him and Robbie.

"Clayburne!" Sullivan boomed. "I've just learned a few things and I'm calling off the shooting. Come out and palaver!"

Bare-headed, Clayburne rose up from behind the rocks and moved out into the open. They heard an anxious voice beseeching him to beware of a trap.

"It's no trap!" Sullivan roared. "That troublemaker, Abe Weeks, has got the lead slug he earned. Come out and talk peace."

They met in the middle of the trail. Jackson's story was told and backed up by Robbie Sullivan.

"I've been a bull-headed old fool," Sullivan rumbled. "It's cost good men's lives. Clayburne, the Government wants a deadline for cattle and sheep. I'm convinced, and my word carries weight with the others. Will you and your men meet us cowmen in Jackson's office tomorrow and draw up an agreement?"

"We will," Clayburne said eagerly.

"There's my hand," Sullivan boomed. "I never thought I'd shake a sheepman's hand."

Hoofbeats floated up from below and then a long-drawn hail.

"Two-ton Bromley," Jackson said. "I told him to bring a posse. There's no work for them now."

He glanced up at the rocks and saw Irene coming, her hair blowing loose in the wind. "There's another agreement coming up soon," he said to old Sullivan.

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it

by CHUCK STANLEY

WINTER on the Bar S. The old mavericker and his young, tenderfoot helper, had come in from shoveling hay to the stock. The old-timer had got a fire going in the box stove, while the younker broke ice in the spring, hauled water and built a pot of java. The line camp got warm, the coffee boiled, and they settled back for one of those gabfests that the young man loved so because they took him back to the days when the land was new.

He poured a cup of coffee, blew on it, gazed out the window of the linecamp at the drifting snow. Finally he asked, "When did cowboys first come to Wyoming?"

"Right after the civil war," the old man said. "I was just a kid back in 1884 when I went with a trail herd up the Texas Trail which was also called the Long Trail. Folks claimed then that more than 800,000 head of cattle had moved northward over the trail from Texas. The Texas drives became one of the spectacular features of the cattle industry. A good many cattle buyers went to Texas for herds of longhorns and had them driven to the great open ranges of Montana."

The Horse Business

"I suppose the horse business boomed, too," the greener declared as he worked his pencil aggressively.

"Sure thing," agreed the mavericker. "Cowboys were no good in them days without horses, and each one had to have a string of from ten to twelve. The first horses brought into Wyoming for working cattle came from Texas and Mexico, but some of the ranchers in the northern Territory soon discovered that they could raise good horses right on their home soil, so they went ahead with considerable success."

"Is the cattle industry in Wyoming as big now as it used to be back in the Old West?" the Arbuckle inquired.

"I don't reckon it is," the mossyhorn declared. "But then that's to be expected with a lot of the open range going under fences, and folks going in for truck farming instead of cattle raising. There were two big blows to the cowmen in the Wyoming Territory, though. One of them came in the winter of 1886-87 when the blizzard killed off a heap of cattle, and the other was the homestead laws which went into effect about the same time."

"Just like all the Western stories we read about the nesters and farmers driving out the big ranchers," chuckled the pilgrim. The old mossyhorn shook his head slowly and chortled with glee.

Ranching in a Small Way

"It wasn't exactly like that," he declared. "I remember a time when I had a little 160 acre ranch of my own in Wy-

A Gabfest on the Johnson County War!

oming. And I wasn't the only one. Plenty of cowboys did the same thing. They'd collect a few cattle of their own, get themselves a homestead, and go to ranching in a small way."

"Wasn't that some of the activity that led up to the Johnson County Cattle War?"

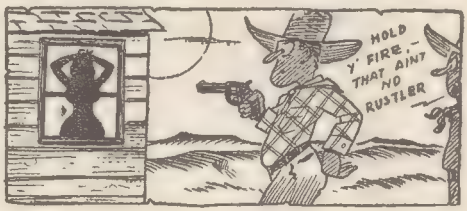
"You might say so," agreed the oldster, "although there have been many mixed stories about that war. I'd like to tell you the true story the way I seen it happen in those days. Like you know, if you look at a map of Wyoming, Johnson County is on the eastern slope of the Big Horn Mountains in northern Wyoming. On Clear Creek which is one of the streams flowing into the Powder River, there's the city of Buffalo which was named after the buffalo that roamed the plains in the old days. Folks said that Buffalo was the rustlers' capital, just like Cheyenne was known as the cowboys' capital.

"The blizzards of 1886-7 put a good many of the cattlemen out of business, by killing off a lot of the herds, and naturally there was nothing else for the cowboys to do except set up their own homesteads and try to operate as vest-pocket ranchers, or greasy-sack ranchers as we said back in Texas. Usually nesters didn't take sides when a battle was going on between rustlers and cattlemen, but in the Johnson County War, the nesters joined the rustlers, because the cattlemen were their chief enemies."

Plumb Dangerous

"I read a bit about Buffalo, and the excitement that went on there," the younker declared. "It wasn't safe to walk along the board sidewalks, or go to bed with your shades pulled up. That must have been plenty nerve-wracking."

The mavericker looked up at the ceiling in a musing manner as though visualizing the actual scenes in which he had taken part. "I'll say it was," he agreed. "It was plumb dangerous for cattlemen and settlers to meet on the sidewalks. The cowmen came into town on one route, and the settlers used another. Same way when they left town. At night shades



were pulled down, and lights were kept low. If you forgot to take these precautions, you'd probably wind up with a dry-gulch bullet in your back or maybe decorating a cottonwood tree."

"But what started the War?" the chronicler wanted to know. He moistened the tip of his pencil, and poised it over the notebook. The oldster puffed out a cloud of pipe smoke, then said:

"The whole business blew wide open in the spring of 1892 when the small ranchers and nesters decided they were going to hold an early roundup. The cattlemen had protective legislation which set definite dates for roundups and provided State brand inspectors to oversee the branding or marking. It also appeared to limit the State maverick law which declared that unbranded cattle were the property of the State. Deciding to take drastic steps, the cattlemen organized a society which they called The Regulators. They organized an expedition along military lines with the expressed intention of hanging or shooting the known rustlers, and chasing their friends among the nesters out of Wyoming."

"But didn't the State Government have anything to say about doin's like that?" the Arbuckle was surprised.

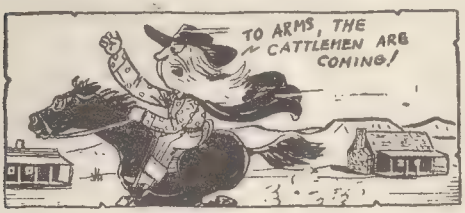
"Not much," declared the oldster. "It was carried on in secret. Hired gunmen were brought in from Texas, Idaho and Colorado. A former Army officer assumed command. On the night of April 5th, 1892, a special train carrying ammunition, provisions, equipment and fifty-two of the Regulators, heavily-armed, left for Casper. From Casper it was planned to make a lightning march to Buffalo about a hun-

dred miles to the north, take over the town and round up the rustlers. This process was to be repeated in any other towns that needed chastising."

"And no one knew what was going on?" the younker was amazed.

To Arms!

"They knew, all right. Couriers carried words of the 'invasion' to Buffalo, but the whole plan was so bold that no one believed the cattlemen would actually carry it out. The wagons were waiting at Casper, the telegraph lines to Buffalo and Sheridan were cut, and cattlemen spies reported that Nate Champion, who some



claimed was leader of the rustlers and nesters, was at the K C ranch, fifty miles south of Buffalo with friend, Nick Ray.

"Champion and Ray were surprised and killed, and the northward march continued. When the news of the killings reached Buffalo, men rushed out into the street now convinced of the seriousness of the situation. An alarm was sent out to the surrounding ranches by mounted messengers. One of the leading merchants of Buffalo, Robert Foote, mounted his black horse and put on a black cape. With his long white beard and hair flying, he rode up and down Main Street and called the people to arms. He had plenty of guns and ammunition in his store and supplied the people with these and tobacco free of charge. Sheriff Red Angus of Johnson County deputized one hundred men and started for the K C Ranch. The ranchers and settlers came in from their vest pocket holdings, organized a Home Defender's Corps, and opened barracks in the churches and schoolhouses."

"Boy, they sure had things stirred up, didn't they?" the pilgrim declared excitedly, "and did the townspeople win?"

"You might say so," the mavericker declared. "The cattlemen never did reach Buffalo. When they heard of the united opposition they turned back to the T A Ranch fourteen miles south of town, and there the Johnson County men caught up with them, captured their supply wagons and forced them into entrenchments on the ranch. The battle raged for the rest of the day, and after dark the cattlemen were preparing to move a portable barricade of logs on wheels into the Johnson County lines with men armed with dynamite bombs to throw at the rustlers and nesters. The battle was interrupted when Colonel J. J. Van Horn arrived from Fort McKinney with three troops of cavalry and the cattlemen submitted to arrest."

"And that was the end of the Johnson County Cattle War, eh?" remarked the pilgrim as he closed his notebook.

"Sure thing," replied his mentor, "and it was lively enough while it lasted. But there were plenty of lively doings in Wyoming among the cowboys and sheepmen in those days."

"I'll bet," the lad agreed. "Tell me more."

The old man chuckled. "Next time," he said as he reached for the coffee pot.

FOLLOW THE EXCITING EXPLOITS
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Warren seized Biscuits by the skirt front

Biscuits, the Lazy J cook, serves his gastronomical masterpiece—in six-gun sauce!

Son-of-a-Gun Stew

By FRANCIS L. FUGATE

PUTTING water-soaked granite in the cook-fire is an old trick, and one way or another it always gets a rise out of the cook. The Lazy L waddies were worried. Initiating a new cook the first night out on roundup was a time-honored institution, but the Old Man would raise very Billy Hell if Biscuits quit, especially right at the start of roundup.

A man couldn't tell about Biscuits. Only his eyes showed between the brim of his hat and a big, bushy white beard—cold gray eyes, not calculated to point up the humor of the situation to the cowhands

who squatted at a respectful distance waiting for the granite to explode and blow the cook-fire to smithereens.

"Shorty, you ought to tell him you put that rock in the fire. What if he ups and takes off like the Chinaman?"

"Look, it wasn't my idea from the start," Shorty protested. "I lugged that hunk of rock up from the creek just because I got the short straw." He glanced at Biscuits, who was puttering over a big kettle, and connected with a frosty gaze. Shorty shuddered. "No, sir—I'm for keepin' the cook friendly. Somebody else can tell him *we* put that rock in the fire."

There were no volunteers. With the possible exception of why Lazy J steers were so scarce at roundup time, Biscuits was about the biggest mystery that ever hit the Lazy J spread.

Some said he came from a big hotel in the East, some said he was from San Francisco where he had cooked during the gold rush, some said the scars on his back were the marks that Indian arrows leave, and others guessed they were from the Civil War. Smoky Devlin, the gambler from Saint Louis who stopped for one meal and stayed for six, said he had eaten cooking like that once in New Orleans. He thought Biscuits was off a Mississippi River packet boat. It's a cinch you couldn't tell about his age with that big white beard spread over his face. But nobody cared too much—he was the best cook that ever rustled steak and sour dough for the Lazy J.

Biscuits could do things to plain flour, beef, bacon, beans, coffee, syrup, and dried fruit that had never been done before. News travels fast up and down the Chisholm Trail, and jobs on the Lazy J began to have premium value. Old Man Bradley could lean back and say Biscuits was a good investment. His waddies were downright eager to make themselves useful as well as ornamental.

THAT'S why they were so worried about what the Old Man would do if Biscuits took off when the water inside the granite formed into steam and blew the cook-fire all over the range. Shorty had sneaked the granite into the fire while they were rustling firewood, but just about everybody was hoping the rock hadn't been in water long enough to explode.

In the first place, talking Biscuits into making a Son-of-a-Gun Stew had been a tall job, and the smell was drifting out of the big kettle mighty handsome. Shorty decided discretion was the better part of an appetite, and was about to go over and rake the granite out of the fire when it happened.

That's when they found that whatever he might be, Biscuits was no pilgrim.

He was pawing around the compartments in the back of the chuck wagon when the granite blew with an almighty roar. The kettle of Son-of-a-Gun rose majestically about two feet, turned over, and dumped with a great sizzling. Where the fire had been was a cloud of smoke and steam, and the air whistled with fragments of stone.

Everybody was watching Biscuits, but afterwards no one could tell exactly what happened. He whirled, cat-like. Nobody had ever seen Biscuits wearing a six-gun, but out of the air a tremendous .45 seemed to grow at his fingertips as he landed in a business-like crouch. To a man the Lazy J waddies grabbed for the sky.

Later three of them swore that the cook somehow managed to hide a Sharps buffalo gun on his person.

"I was the closest, an' I ought to know," declared Shorty. "That was a regular cannon!" He shook his head mournfully. "It's almost worth turnin' in hungry to see that draw—but I'd still like to taste his Son-of-a-Gun Stew!"

Dawn had not yet grayed the eastern sky the next morning when Biscuits was up stirring soda, salt, and water into sour dough for flapjacks. A thin streamer of light outlined the horizon by the time he deemed he had a sufficiency of golden brown pancakes to satisfy the appetites of cowhands who had turned in the night before on empty stomachs. As he let the sorghum bubble into the bacon drippings to prepare "fried molasses," he threw

back his head for a leather-lunged blast;

"Roll out, you waddies! It's gettin' daylight. Come and get it before I throw it in the creek!"

Shame-faced Lazy J hands found no animosity in Biscuits' eyes, and the flapjacks were feather-light. Just the same, the boys were more than ordinarily helpful in packing the bedrolls into the chuck wagon. As Shorty said, "Only a fool argues with a woman, a mule, or the cook."

Biscuits had just mounted the driver's seat and slipped the reins of the double team between his fingers when Old Man Bradley lathered into camp. Almost immediately everybody knew the Lazy J had a new ramrod. He'd be in that evening.

"I know it's pretty hard on roundup," Bradley told Biscuits, "but I wonder if you could fix up something sort of special tonight. This man looks like a top range boss, and he seems to be an eater. I want to keep him."

"What's his name?" For the first time since his arrival at the Lazy J, the cook showed interest in something besides his pots and pans.

"Warren—Homer Warren," Bradley told him. "He's from up North, but I like his looks. I hope he can stop this infernal thieving. I'm going to bring him out tonight."

"We'll h a v e something." Biscuits clucked the wagon into motion. Outwardly he gave no sign that the name meant anything, but inside his heart was next to exploding. Blood roaring in his temples blotted out the rattling of the chuck wagon.

Homer Warren! Biscuits' beard twitched as six years of bitter, brooding hate distorted the face beneath. Automatically the cook felt to see if the pouch holster that held the six-gun beneath his flannel shirt was in place. The gun's hardness was comforting, and he urged the horses over the rough terrain, tensing to control them as they shied from a maverick that threshed in the mesquite at the side of the road, if the old creek bed could be called a road.

BENEATH the beard Biscuits was Jim Kane, a face and name that Warren would know well. Anger boiled within Biscuits, a blinding rage that caused him to grip the reins until his fingers hurt. Suddenly he relaxed and smiled. It was a grim, triumphant smile. He had figured right—food would find Homer Warren. The plan was born in his mind on that blazing summer afternoon as he lay helpless in front of a cabin on Comanche Creek, his back feathered with arrows.

Food had been Warren's only thought then. The whisky trader who occupied the cabin was a good cook. Together he and Warren slaughtered a calf and rode away with the choice cuts. Warren had not even bothered to feel Biscuits' body—and lucky that was, too. Biscuits knew that if Warren had known he lived, one of the arrows would have been driven deeper into his back.

When the soldiers arrived, they were surprised to find him alive, and still more surprised that he endured the agony of the trip to the fort. Finally came the trial. Warren didn't show up for the trial, but the lieutenant who had been Officer of the Day at the fort testified. Homer Warren had reported finding a dead whiskey trader at a cabin on Comanche Creek.

Warren had said he was trail boss of a herd of contract beef being driven to the fort for issue to the Indians. A portion of the herd had stampeded. He and another man had followed to the whiskey trader's cabin and found the results of an Indian attack.

The story had enough truth to be damning. Warren had been the trail boss all right, and part of the herd had stampeded. But not without help! And the herd had been followed to the whisky trader's cabin. Biscuits knew, because he had ridden the trail. Downwind he picked up the smell of burning hair, and found the trader and two Indians busy with a running iron.

Biscuits had the drop on them when Warren rode up. The trail boss took the prisoners and left Biscouits with the herd while he went for help. The next thing Biscuits knew, Comanches were sweep-

ing down upon him. Later Warren and the trader returned to butcher the calf.

The trial at Fort Smith was short and to the point. The judge didn't have time for long, involved defense testimony. Selling whisky in Indian Territory was a serious crime. Knowing that Warren was somewhere outside was the only thing that made prison endurable.

Methodically Biscuits mulled over ways of finding him, and cast them aside one by one. Food was by all odds the best bait. He welcomed the hated, steamy filth of the prison kitchen. He listened to other prisoners who knew how to cook. For five long years he listened to every word he could hear about food and how to prepare it. Each scrap of information burned indelibly into his memory. Then one day a guard was careless.

Biscuits knew only that Warren would be west of the Mississippi. Probably he would be outside of the law, but above all, he would be looking for food. San Antonio had seemed a likely spot, but when Old Man Bradley told him about the Lazy J spread, squarely astraddle the Chisholm Trail, this sounded even better. Like a spider, he waited in that enormous web of the cattle country, ever fearful that a United States marshal would find him first.

With the realization that at last he had found Warren, the tenseness left Jim Kane's body, and he had a feeling of relief that was likely a partial payment for the years of waiting. Now he had only to think of a fitting punishment. His jaw clenched. Not punishment—a suitable death!

Biscuits stopped long enough to leave a hastily-prepared dinner of beans, canned tomatoes and strong black coffee at a designated spot, and dashed on in the mad drive that he might have more time to spend on the evening meal—a meal for Homer Warren.

The hate that had helped him survive Indian arrows and the lonesome grayness of prison re-kindled. By the time he selected an evening camp site, the hate had burned down to a murderous bed of white-hot coals, visible only through tiny dots in his cold gray eyes. He cleaned his six-gun carefully as he stared unseeing at the bubbling kettle on the cook-fire. Within himself he fought a mad desire to kill on sight—a desire that could only lead him back to prison.

OVER the slow fire simmered a pot of fat beef, seasoned with incongruous odds and ends unknown to most ranch cooks. Biscuits split off a goodly lump of dough before he put the sourdough biscuits into the Dutch oven. He set the dough aside to rise. The slow-moving roundup herd stirred a distant cloud of dust, and his heart quickened. He eyed his kettles and nodded approvingly. The timing was just right.

He pinched the extra dough into thumb-sized lumps and dropped them into the stew. He was dissolving flour in a tin cup of water for thickening when two riders loped into sight along the creek trail. Bradley and Warren! Biscuits felt for his gun, thought he didn't think he would be recognized behind the beard.

"So this is the cook, eh, Bradley!"

Warren didn't even look at him. He swung easily off his oversized dun and strode purposefully toward the cook-fire. Without asking Biscuits' permission, he lifted the lid of the largest kettle, peered in, and sniffed. The dumplings were swelling, and the whole concoction was giving off a delectable odor.

Biscuits noted slight change in Warren's appearance—maybe a little fatter, maybe a little meaner looking. There had been no prison to whiten his jet hair, or dull the glitter of his small, black, deep-set eyes.

"Beef an' dumplin's, and on roundup!" he exclaimed. "Bradley, you *did* get a cook! I'm goin' to like the Lazy J—yes sir!"

Biscuits turned away as Warren looked toward him for the first time. He reached under his beard to unfasten his shirt. The temptation to whisk the gun from its holster was almost unbearable. His heart was pounding so loudly that he knew they must hear it. But there was no recogni-

tion in Warren's hard black eyes.

"Just keep the pot boilin', old-timer, and you and me'll get along fine!" He and Bradley walked away together, and sat on the shady side of the chuckwagon to talk.

Biscuits listened as he mixed flour, water, and lard in the top of a sack of flour to make pie dough. With deft care he fashioned half-moon shaped turnovers, filled with dried peaches that had been soaking in water. Freshly made fried pies were also a roundup rarity. Bradley didn't want to keep Warren interested in the Lazy J any less than did Biscuits.

The dust that marked the herd drifted closer while Bradley was explaining to Warren that the Lazy J roundup was a giant, sweeping figure-eight movement, with the ranch at the center. The herd would be trail-branded from day to day. As they reached the end of the northern arc of the first half of the figure-eight, they would strike the Chisholm Trail. The accumulation of cattle would be started for Abilene.

"The way I see it," Bradley explained, "this year, the earlier we get to market, the better the price."

"Right!" Warren agreed.

"Then," said Bradley, "we cover the other half. Time is all-important."

"Yes sir!" said Warren. "The way to drive a roundup crew is to set a schedule, just like a freight line—a little more than can be done every day, and then be mighty sure they do it!"

Bradley shook his head grimly. "We should get three thousand head on each side, but we're not doing it. It's almost like we was following a roundup, instead of making one." He grimaced toward the herd. "Combings, that's all we're getting."

Warren poked Bradley's knee. "If there's any of that, we'll stop it! he said confidently. "Yes sir!" He tapped his chest for emphasis. "I'll ride the outer circle myself—*I'll* find out what's goin' on."

"I hope so." Bradley spread his hands in a gesture of defeat. "We're two weeks late now, on account of Crego quitting. I can't figure that, either. I offered him more money."

Warren shrugged his shoulders. "Some foremen don't give a hoot," he depreciated, his tone carrying an implication of loyalty.

SUDDENLY two more riders attracted Biscuits' attention to the creek trail. He recognized the gaunt frame of Shorty in the lead, but the second man was a stranger, a little man who flapped about in his saddle like a tarpaulin in a high wind.

"Need a new hand?" Shorty called. He was grinning.

"I reckon we can always use a man during roundup," hazarded Bradley somewhat dubiously as he watched the little man almost fall off his horse.

"I'll work!" the newcomer asserted earnestly.

Biscuits noted that his six-shooter was almost as big as he was.

"You bet you'll work!" snapped Warren. "Start by rustlin' some firewood, cuttin' it, an' puttin' it on the chuckwagon." He paused. "What's your name?" he demanded.

"Simpson," said the new hand. Immediately he went about his assignment. Biscuits frowned. He didn't like the looks of a man who wore a .45 like it was built into his Levis, but didn't know enough to get off his pony to rope brush and driftwood and drag it up to the fire.

The next morning Biscuits was barely beyond sight of the camp when he stopped the chuck wagon and dug into Simpson's bedroll. It was the smallest of the lot, and revealingly new. An icy hand seemed to squeeze Biscuits' heart as he saw a letter addressed to Simpson in San Antonio. He felt perspiration beading on his forehead.

He didn't need to read the letter—the return address was enough.

Simpson was a federal marshal! Biscuits' hands trembled so violently that he could hardly refasten the bedroll. The gray stone of prison walls seemed to rise out of the mesquite and sage, blotting out

the warmth of the morning sun. In spite of the perspiration, he felt cold. A musty odor was in his nostrils.

There was only one sensible thing to do. Take a horse and ride. Ride like the wind and lose himself in the oblivion south of San Antonio. The wind tugged gently at his beard, and Biscuits looked down, smoothing its silky whiteness. Hot rage burned the coldness of fear out of his heart. His beard should be red. The scars on his back twinged as a tingling prickle of hate rode up and down his spinal column. He grabbed the whip from the seat beside him and cracked it over the lead team. Freedom would be meaningless if Warren were alive, he decided.

That night Biscuits watched Simpson. The little man was cheerful. Said he had come from Cincinnati for his health. He took the ragging of the Lazy J hands good-naturedly. He was willing, they decided when he managed to rope a steer by one horn and hung on, even after he was dragged off his pony. The boys showed him a good use for the saddle horn, and Shorty conceded that he was going to be "downright helpful at brandin', if he stuck to tendin' the fire."

As usual, Biscuits turned in early, but he couldn't sleep. Gradually the Lazy J hands deserted the fire, and it died to a dim, pinkish pinpoint. The only definable human sound was the occasional distant monotone of the night guard's song. Biscuits' eyes stung with the need for sleep, but they refused to stay closed. Once he dozed, and dreamed that Simpson was holding up a tremendous poster with his picture: JIM KANE—DEAD OR ALIVE—$5,000. Warren was standing with a leveled Colt. Biscuits jerked awake, and Warren's evil leer faded. The camp was still and black.

Suddenly out of the darkness came the thrumping of a horse—closer than the night rider, on the opposite side of the camp from the herd, heading northward. On his hands and knees Biscuits crawled to where Simpson had gone to sleep. Dimly he could see that the bedroll was occupied. Getting to his feet, he tiptoed about the camp. Warren was gone.

Quickly Biscuits saddled a pony. It was like following a shadow, riding into the moonless night, then listening, ear to the ground for the distant throbbing. Then more riding and more listening. Warren's route took shape. Straight north, and he was riding hard. The sound was fainter. Biscuits spurred his pony and sped into the coolness of the night. He had to take a chance.

WHEN he saw a dot of light, he slowed cautiously and circled behind a rise that was outlined blackly against the starry sky. Finally he hobbled his pony and crept toward the light. Two figures hunkered by the fire. In the distance Biscuits could now hear a night herder, singing a herd to sleep—a big herd by the sound. As he snaked closer to the fire Biscuits' heart pounded at the whispered scraping of his knees. A horse nickered, and he froze behind a thin clump of mesquite. But they paid no attention. They were arguing.

Their voices were muffled, but unmistakably it was Crego and Warren. Biscuits found that he had involuntarily taken his .45 from its holster. Warren was raging angrily because the herd was not trail-branded and ready to go. Crego was just as angry because Warren had made him leave the Lazy J roundup crew.

"You ought to have to eat what I've had for the last two weeks," he complained.

"Get that herd branded tomorrow, and head for Abilene!" snarled Warren. "What if Bradley decides to work ahead of the roundup? He's suspicious."

"All right, all right," soothed Crego. "Tomorrow."

"You're tootin' it'll be tomorrow, and I'll be here to see that you're doin' it!"

Silently Biscuits retreated. It was clear what was happening, but there was nothing he could do about it. The chances were pretty good that beyond the fire slept as fine a collection of owlhoots as had ever been gathered together. Warren would see to that. Lone wolf gunplay would be suicidal.

Biscuits had no difficulty sleeping when he returned to the Lazy J camp. The night guard had to shake him out of his bedroll. Biscuits checked and found that Warren was sound asleep, but one of his string of duns showed signs of a recent hard ride.

Bradley left early for the Lazy J headquarters, before Biscuits could make up his mind whether to tell him what he had learned. There would be no point in telling Simpson. It was no hide off a federal marshal if Bradley lost every steer on the Lazy J. Simpson was looking for Jim Kane. Actually, Biscuits reasoned, it was none of his business either. He had his own worries.

While Biscuits hitched up the chuckwagon, Warren was loudly proclaiming that he was going to do something about this danged rustling, if there was any going on. Also, he wanted five more miles today, if it took till dark.

"Remember that, old-timer," he jerked over his shoulder at Biscuits. "And you, you phildoodle saddle loafers," he sneered at the few hands who had not yet ridden away toward the herd, "Mr. Bradley wants these steers in Abilene in time to sell 'em, not give 'em away!"

Without any definite plan of action, Biscuits saddled a horse and tethered it to the back of the chuckwagon. He might decide to light out for the Border. The more he thought about it, the less point there seemed in risking prison again. The vengeance trail was a fool's ride. If he didn't get away from Simpson while he could, it would be too late. He felt rather than saw Warren staring at him. Warren was frowning at the saddled pony.

"I like to scout around for a good camp spot," Biscuits explained. He had to look away from the glittering eyes.

"Good!" said Warren, and abruptly smiled. "Old-timer, you just keep turnin' out that food—yes sir!" He raised his reins and started to wheel away. "Say!" He jerked his horse back on its haunches. "Say," he called to Biscuits as he was mounting to the seat of the chuck wagon, "how about Son-of-a-Gun Stew? I'll bet you really put one out."

"Maybe—sometime," Biscuits hedged into his beard.

"Tonight," Warren insisted.

Biscuits shook his head. "Takes too long." Actually, he had the ingredients, and had planned to serve a stew. "You said we got to make five miles extra, and I'm getting a late start."

Warren's eyes narrowed. "I also said I want a Son-of-a-Gun Stew!" he said flatly.

"Takes time," Biscuits grumbled.

"I don't care how long it takes," snarled Warren. "Push that muck-a-muck wagon!"

BISCUITS inched his right hand up to unbutton his shirt. The rasping voice of the man on the uneasy dun stirred the bitterness anew. He felt his body tense.

"Been up North, I see," he said.

"How's that?" Warren stiffened. "What makes you think so?"

"That Cayuse lingo—muck-a-muck."

Warren leaned forward in his saddle. "Pretty smart for a cook, ain't you?" He unhooked his thumb from his belt and let his hand swing beside his six-gun. His fingers crooked dangerously.

Quickly Biscuits' hand closed over his Colt. He looked down and saw Simpson watching, alert, almost crouching. Biscuits had a dizzy sinking feeling, and his stomach seemed to contract.

"No-no, sir," he stuttered, and took up the reins, careful to show both hands. "I-I just happen to know Cayuse Injun lingo."

"Well, old-timer, you just stick to cookin'." Warren relaxed. "And I want a Son-of-a-Gun Stew tonight, get it!"

"Yes, sir," Biscuits agreed meekly, and urged the chuckwagon into motion.

Over his shoulder he saw Warren ride away to the north. Riding the outer circle, he had said, but Biscuits knew that he was going to see that Crego's herd got trail-branded and under way. By the time what was left of the Lazy J steers got to Abilene, Crego would be long

gone. But it was still none of his business, Biscuits figured.

If he read Simpson's actions right, he was watching to be sure nothing happened until he verified his suspicions. Next to Texas Rangers, federal marshals were noted for quick action. If Biscuits were smart, he would high-tail it for the Border while he had the chance. He could take the chuckwagon far enough south that they wouldn't find it right away, and use the saddle horse from then on.

But that left Warren on the loose. The memory of that day on Comanche Creek flecked Biscuits' vision with swirling red and black dots. Suddenly he leaned against the reins to turn the horses. Straining, they dragged the chuckwagon up out of the old creek bed—toward the north. He had noticed a thick clump of mesquite on a feeder creek. There he would leave the chuckwagon and ride after Warren. He would force a showdown. Then—if there was a then—and if he had time, he would think about getting away from Simpson.

Biscuits was glad of the decision. A definite plan was better than the uneasy hate that had burned within him for so long. Whatever happened, Warren couldn't ride free, not if he could help it. In the clump of mesquite he unhitched the horses and let them drink from the creek. Then he tightened the cinches on his saddle, and removed odds and ends from the chuckwagon. He was checking his Colt when he heard a voice.

"So that's where you carry it!" The voice was unmistakable. "The boys told me about that fast draw of yours."

Slowly Biscuits looked up—squarely down the barrel of a .45, and then into Warren's smug grin. His heart stopped, and his knees went weak. Only Warren's thumb on the hammer of his Colt was between him and death. He could see the dull leaden noses of the big slugs in the cylinder of the rock-steady six-gun.

"Drop it!" Warren rasped.

Biscuits let his gun thud to the ground.

[*Turn page*]

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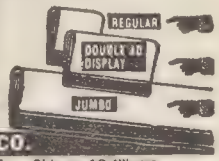

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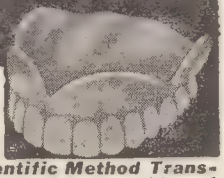

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The Colt in Warren's hand jerked, and slowly he raised his hands head-high. The foreman stepped forward and pulled his shirt open to look at the pouch holster. Then he felt about Biscuits' waist and sleeves.

"Pretty slick, ain't you?" he said. "With a rig like that, I figured you'd have a hideout."

Biscuits stood in helpless silence. His mind was blank; there was nothing to say. Warren stared at him narrowly. "I thought I'd better keep an eye on you. Just what are you up to anyhow?" he demanded.

"I-I—er—just watering the team," Biscuits stammered dully. "I'm goin' to push from here on."

"Waterin', bosh!" jeered Warren. "What's wrong with the water in the big creek? It's closer. You—you—" Warren's voice dwindled as he stared into Biscuits' face. His jaw slicked, and he paled. "You—you're—" Suddenly his hand darted out, and he jerked Biscuits' shirt, ripping it from his back. Roughly he spun him around. *"Jim Kane!"* he exclaimed unbelievingly. "By cripes, I should have known that hawk nose, even in the middle of that face foliage."

BISCUITS tensed and started to whirl, but the cold nose of Warren's .45 poked hard into his back. "Easy—just turn around easy like."

Relief was written on Warren's face. "So you're who that lawdog's lookin' for!"

"You won't get away with it, Warren." Biscuits found his voice. "Bradley'll find out about you and Crego—" The foreman started, and Biscuits bit his lip. He had talked too much.

Warren's eyes glittered, and his face tightened. "Well, now we do have a smart cook, don't we?" He leaned against the off-wheel of the chuck wagon. His eyes seemed to glaze over, the eyes of a killer. His thumb quivered on the hammer of his Colt.

"What are you going to do?" Biscuits asked, and started to inch away.

"Stand still!" barked Warren. Then he

glanced up at the sun. "Must be about noon." He smiled—an assured, satisfied smile that did not dull the dangerous glaze of his eyes. "I'm goin' to eat, and you're goin' to cook." His lips tightened into a hard black line. "A Son-of-a-Gun Stew, like I told you to." He sneered. "Then I'm goin' to help Mr. Simpson. I'm goin' to recognize you, sort of accidental like, and you're goin' to make a play for your gun." He smiled, a smile that was entirely without humor. "Simple. Yes sir!"

There was nothing to say. The Colt did not waver. Suddenly it moved ominously. "Now git!" said Warren. "Get to buildin' a fire, and be careful what you take off of that chuckwagon."

As slowly as possible, Biscuits went about preparing the top delicacy of the range. The tongue, sweetbreads, heart, brains, and liver of a yearling that had been butchered the day before went into the big kettle, finely chopped. While it cooked he peeled potatoes and got out canned vegetables. There was little chance for trickery under the watchful muzzle of Warren's gun, almost none at all. Biscuits made innumerable trips from the chuck wagon to the fire and back, and to the creek; but Warren remained at his elbow.

The kettle was bubbling, cooking with remarkable speed a meal to which Biscuits didn't think he would be invited. Warren sniffed and smiled. "Yes sir, Kane, nothin' like good food."

[*Turn page*]

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Biscuits waited anxiously, watching the fire and hoping. Warren prodded him with the six-gun. "How much longer?" he demanded.

"Not long," Biscuits said, and went to remove the lid and stir the stew. Warren followed and peered into the pot.

"Looks done to me."

Biscuits watched the fire and prayed. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Warren draw back the hammer of the Colt. "Kane, I like to use both hands when I eat, and this sort of hampers me." He shook the gun. "So I reckon we'd better finish our business. If you'll just walk over there by the—"

Suddenly the fire exploded sharply, and the lid clattered off the stew kettle. The Colt moved, not far, but far enough for Biscuits to have time to kick. The sir-shooter went spinning into the air, and he dived for Warren, catching him by one foot. Together they crashed to the ground, Warren cursing, kicking, and lashing out with vicious, clawing hands.

He caught Biscuits by the beard and jerked. It was as if Biscuits' head were being torn from his shoulders. Biscuits had to let loose of Warren to grab with both hands. At the same time Warren's knee found his abdomen, and he rolled on his back, sick and gasping. Dimly he heard Warren scramble up, and saw him draw back a murderous foot. With a superhuman effort he arched his body and rode the blow, grabbing with both arms. He felt his ribs crack, and Warren crashed down on top of him.

Again the big man got to his feet and stepped back a couple of paces, leaving Biscuits on his hands and knees, limp and sick. The ground seemed to move under him. He could see Warren deliberately measuring the distance to his head. With all his strength he staggered up, and managed to stay on his feet to meet the angry, bull-like rush. Desperately he found the corded neck and dug his thumbs into the vital soft spots of Warren's throat at the top of his breast bone.

With a wheezing, gagging sound, Warren's body buckled, and he sank away

from Biscuits. Squarely into the stew kettle he sat. For an instant he shook his head. Biscuits scrambled for his Colt. Warren screamed, and tried to struggle to his feet, but Biscuits pushed him back.

ABRUPTLY the mesquite parted, and Shorty rode into view. "Saw smoke from the fire." At the sight of Biscuits' Colt he reined up and slowly raised his hands. Simpson was close behind. His hand flickered downward, but fortunately for Biscuits, who was shoving Warren back into the stew, the jarring of the marshal's ride had worked his holster down around his thigh. His wary eyes intent on Biscuits, he raised his hands also.

"Oh—, let me up!" screamed Warren. "I'm burnin' alive!"

"James Kane," said Simpson in an ominous, level tone, "I'm warning you!"

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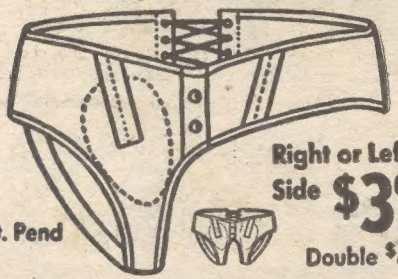

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"Shut up!" snapped Biscuits. He brought the barrel of the Colt in line with Warren's head. "Talk fast, talk! Tell about what happened on Comanche Creek." From the corner of his eye he saw Simpson make an experimental move. He jerked the gun briefly in his direction. "And *you,* listen!"

Warren talked. Squirming and jerking, he talked in an agonizing, screaming voice. His story was incoherent, but complete in detail—even things that Biscuits had never suspected. Finally he lowered the gun, and Warren rolled off the fire. Frantically he dashed for the creek.

Grimly Simpson scrambled off his pony. He disregarded Biscuits. Unshucking his big .45, he made for Warren, who could be heard splashing and moaning. Shorty rode up to the fire. He peered into the over-turned kettle that was still dripping and sputtering.

"Son-of-a-Gun Stew," he lamented, "an' I'll be durned if it don't have to be flavored with that owlhoot."

"I'll make another, Shorty," Biscuits promised. "If you hadn't put that rock under the first one, I'd never have known what to do." He brushed dust from his twisted beard, and recovered his hat. "But first," he added, "we've got to roundup a herd of Lazy J steers."

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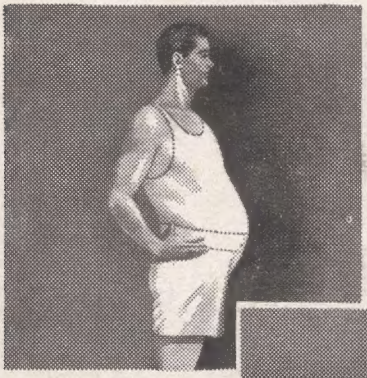
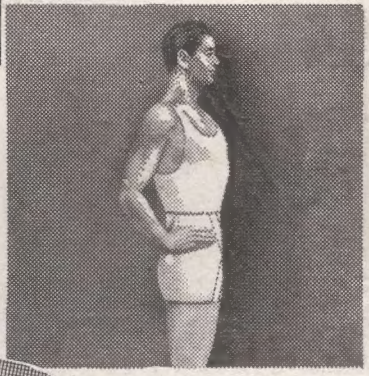
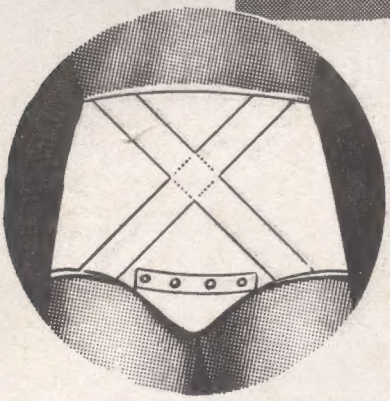


BEFORE ◀

AFTER ▶



Correct Your Whole Posture



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Special extra crotch, $1.00

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TAKES 3 INCHES OFF YOUR WAISTLINE

INSTANTLY!.. MAKES YOU LOOK 10 YEARS YOUNGER

Mr. America with its exclusive criss-cross panel is the latest, most scientific Tummy-Reducer. It takes 3 inches off your waistline in absolute comfort, raises the abdomen and holds it in, brings in waist. You look and feel like a new man. Your slimmer appearance makes your clothes fit handsomely and you become popular and successful.

Expertly made of finest fabrics, Mr. America will safely safeguard your vital area. It has a detachable crotch and washes new again in a jiffy.

No man should be careless with his appearance. Mr. America Tummy Reducer makes you look sharp all the time.

Mr. America is shipped to you in a *plain wrapper* on a 10-DAY FREE TRIAL basis. After the 10 day period, if not satisfied, your money will be fully refunded.

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Please rush MR. AMERICA on approval mailed in plain wrapper. If not delighted, I may return it within ten (10) days for refund of purchase price.

☐ I enclose $..... you pay postage.

☐ Send C.O.D. I'll pay $..... plus postage.

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